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fall 2012

directions

Journal of the Association of Nature Center Administrators

Putting Your Newsletter on Steroids

Environmental education is a transformative experience. Can the same be said of our newsletters?

Jeremy Lloyd
Special Programs Coordinator
Great Smoky Mountains Institute at Tremont
Townsend, TN

a Quick Survey
Choose the statement below that most accurately describes how you feel:

A) Newsletters suck. They're boring and nobody reads them. I don't read those I receive from organizations I belong to. Lord help those who read mine.

B) Newsletters don't suck. I just don't have time to read them. There isn't much inside them that really grabs and holds my attention. I hope the same isn't true of mine.

C) I dutifully read the newsletters of organizations whose missions I support. It is an obligatory

act and I skim the articles quickly. Editing my organization's newsletter is a task I likewise perform more out of duty than joy. Old ladies tell me they read it. I'm sure more than a few copies probably ended up lining the bottom of bird cages before we went to digital-only.

D) I pick and choose which newsletters I read based on which ones I know are worth reading. The best ones show a level of care not just in presentation alone but in the writing. It indicates to me how strongly the organization believes in itself, budget, and time constraints notwithstanding. I read them not just for information but

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Founded in 1989, the Association of Nature Center Administrators is a private non-profit organization dedicated to promoting and supporting best leadership and management practices for nature and environmental learning centers.

Serving more than 500 members, ANCA is the leader in the profession.

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Rooted in Experience. Reaching for Excellence.

Directions is a quarterly publication of the Association of Nature Center Administrators, distributed to members of ANCA as a membership benefit.

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Lynette Blake: Circle Game, oil painting
photo courtesy of the artist

Baltimore Woods Nature Center Weeks Art Gallery is pleased to present *Within and Beyond*, an exhibit and sale of oil paintings by Lynette Blake Sept. 4 - Oct. 26, 2012

Director's Notes

Planned Giving

Jen Levy
Executive Director
Association of Nature Center Administrators
Logan, UT

We rejuvenated, we reconnected, we rediscovered… at the Summit on the Shore. I want to thank The Marine Science Consortium in Wallops Island, VA for the outstanding job they did hosting the ANCA Summit. First-timer Vanessa Hayes, Evergreen Nature Center, CO, said of her experience, "It was an incredibly valuable opportunity to learn from other nature center people, from both their mistakes and successes. I immediately felt at home and folks would go out of their way to see how they can help me and my center."

Once again, the Summit provided us with the opportunity to network with colleagues, share stories and successes, ask questions, and promote best practices.

To that end, we had the opportunity to report on the success of the ANCA Ever Green Society (EGS) and introduce the Charter Members of this giving society that recognizes gifts of $1,000 or more within the ANCA Annual Fund. We are grateful to this group of donors, listed on the following page, for launching the fund and supporting ANCA member services.

There is still an opportunity to be included as a Charter Member – if you make a gift or pledge before December 31, 2012, you will be added to the Charter Membership. To date, we have raised close to $40,000 in EGS cash and pledges.

In addition to the $1,000 cash gifts we have three donors who have included ANCA in their planned giving. What is planned giving? Planned giving is another way to give outside of making a cash donation. Planned giving includes gifts through wills, charitable gift annuities, and charitable trusts. When you are a planned gift donor, ANCA will honor you with membership in the Ever Green Society.

Do you have a planned giving program at your center? If not, this is a great time to get started. Why? It is important, even in tough economic times, to look to the future and the long-term financial health of your organization. Also, the timing is great right now to have these conversations with your donors.

According to the August 1, 2012 issue of The NonProfit Times, donors want more options for how to support organizations

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Giving (continued from page 2)

and increase their giving during hard times, especially when they cannot give as much cash. The article, "Legacy Giving Programs Take Plenty of Planning," reminds us that if you do not write a will, the government is going to "grab a bunch of your estate."

Planned giving gives your donors the power to direct their estate to where they want it to go, including charitable organizations. According to Guidestar, the average bequest size in the U.S. is $32,000.

It is important to get advice or assistance with planned giving from an attorney or professional advisor before considering these types of gifts. I think the best piece of advice from The NonProfit Times article is "You need to advertise you're open for business and ready to accept bequests. If you don't tell donors you're open for business, they'll do it for other charities."

photo by Ann Rilling

The ANCA Summit is also a great place for your board members to rejuvenate as demonstrated here by Sandy Creek Nature Center Inc. board members Emily Carr and Alison Huff.

ANCA Ever Green Society Charter Members

Anonymous
Tudi Arneill
Mary & Jim Berry*
Sandy Bivens
Paul & Debbi Brainerd
Dave Catlin*
Buffy Cheek
Delaware Nature Society
Holly Dill
Elachee Nature Science Center
Victor & Colleen Elderton*
Cibolo Nature Center
Ryan & Sherri Fellows
Great Smoky Mountains Institute at Tremont
Jenny Harmon
Woody & Cynthia Harrell
The Merrill G. and Emita E. Hastings Foundation
The Troverts (X&N)
Lucille Higgins
Jason & Heather Kindall
Keanna & Dennis Leonard
James & Corinne Levy
Jen Levy & Sean Keenan
Dede Long*
Gordon T. & Margaret F. Maupin
Corky & Fran McReynolds
Microsoft Matching Gifts Program
Sandra Murphy
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Tina Popson & Corey McIntosh
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Polly & Bob Thomas
Dick Touvell
Suzanne M. Tuttle
Francis Velazquez*
Patty Weisse & George Thomas
Pat & Edward Welch*
Amber & Ed Zygmunt

Ever Green Society Planned Giving Donors

Charity Krueger
Bob Mercer
Larry Richardson

* EGS members who have made more than one EGS gift

Contributions as of 10/1/2012

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Steroids (continued from page 1)

for the pleasure they provide.

The Great Newsletter Malaise

The editor of a newspaper I used to write for once told me, "Our job is to fill the space not taken up by ads." For a young writer such as myself, it wasn't exactly a rousing endorsement on behalf of the power of words. Twenty years on, more than a few organizations' newsletters I've read also seem sometimes like little more than space-fillers.

We can think of myriad excuses for not making our newsletters the best they can be. There's not enough time or money. Not enough staff. Add to that the declining power of the printed (or digital) word in an increasingly visually-oriented age. It's an attention deficit world we live in, our machines beeping and buzzing at us as our schedules only continue to get busier. Who has time to read, let alone for pleasure?

Still.

It's my conviction that language isn't something we should give up on. Quite the contrary. Better than any other medium, words can convey in the truest sense the extraordinary – and ordinary – things taking place at nature centers around the country every week. It takes effort of course. But another conviction of mine is that newsletters generally are under-utilized as a means for furthering an organization's mission. (In which case, greater effort can result in greater impact.) Sure, we can say what we believe. We might even show statistics proving why we're important through membership numbers, annual giving amounts, evaluations, etc. But something crucial will be missing.

The motto of Great Smoky Mountains Institute at Tremont, where I work, is "connecting people and nature." If we're any good at it our newsletter had better show it, and not with cold hard data alone but with the stories we tell and how we tell them. Are our articles generic and bland, delivering the same predictable storyline issue after issue? Though we still have room for improvement, I'd like to think not.

It's not necessary to be a gifted writer to tell a good story. But it does take a little work, a keen eye, and a leap of faith that words matter and can have real impact.

Believe in Words

There is no magic formula for improving or otherwise breathing new life into your organization's newsletter. But a few of these suggestions may spark some ideas.

• Time – Sure, there's never enough time to write. Reading for pleasure too may indeed be fast becoming a countercultural activity. To the extent that this is true, you should already be in familiar country, because as mainstream as any nature center may wish to be, there's something inherently countercultural about what we encourage our audiences to do. Get out of your car. Move slowly. Get dirty. Smell the flowers. Why not add to our messaging Read this. Like a walk in nature it will be time well spent.

• Space – Think about setting aside at least one section in your newsletter for genuine storytelling, if you're not already doing it. Information without inspiration makes reading very dull. What you're doing matters a lot to your little corner of the world – but how?

• Delight in the senses – Imagistic writing is the hallmark of care-full writing, a phrase I use to refer to the consideration we show our audience by inviting them not merely to listen to us, but to participate in what we've experienced by reliving it vicariously through the written word. This will take work: both careful and care-full writing. But if the physical world (you know, the one outside your office window) is what you've been entrusted with, it makes perfect sense to rely on physical details to help your readers see, hear, smell, taste, and touch something that they too can experience.

• Dig deeper – A single powerful image can have more staying power than trying to tell a story with too many parts: "We caught insects on our hands and knees,

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clawing away at the grasses and weeds. In no time we dirtied our clothes and fingernails, laughing as we got mud on our faces while trying to brush the hair out of our eyes."

• Make full use of your toolbox – Borrowing even just one or two from a range of techniques can breathe life into the stalest of subjects. Examples: ask a question, describe gestures and reactions of kids leading up to an "aha" moment, present a mind-blowing fact, use dialogue, go "into scene" (the actual passage of time as opposed to summary), place what you're thinking in italics, quote from established writers.

• Believe in drafts – Few writers worth their salt can produce their best writing in a single draft. (We can blame the Beat Generation for instilling this bad habit in young writers.) As fun as many paperback novels are to read, many authors of such books compose only single drafts, and it shows in their writing which is often mediocre. Many such books are quickly forgotten and stand little chance of being read a generation from now, providing that people are still reading then. Wouldn't you rather have your newsletter stand the test of time?

• Play with words – Writing, like teaching, ought to convey a writer's enthusiasm. It goes without saying that if you are unenthusiastic about the article you're writing, it will show. But you should be equally enthusiastic about the tools you use when you write. Enjoy words. Play with them. Take pleasure in them. Try out new ones. Use *pearlescent* in a sentence.

• Maximize each issue's potential – Send it to your local newspaper. Quote from it in an annual appeal for giving. Share it with your board. See, this is the kind of impact environmental learning programs can have on individuals, it should scream. It will also serve as a written record over time by providing a window into the past, and will set a high bar for future staff and administrators. Alas, there's far less potential for this in digital-only editions.

• Photos don't tell the whole story – Words can convey something even the best photos cannot. A photo represents a frozen moment in time. A story told through language is time itself, a truer representative of life.

• Experiment – As a fun exercise, eavesdrop on a group of kids talking among themselves at your center and write down what they're

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TIPS FOR BETTER WRITING
~FOR NEWSLETTERS & MORE~

Read Better in Order to Write Better

• Lack of reading leads to cultural, intellectual and spiritual impoverishment. Find out who the best authors are and read them. Their influence will rub off on you. The opposite is also true when it comes to authors who are mediocre or worse: garbage in, garbage out.

• Read widely and deeply. Break out of your usual reading routine. Challenge yourself: read fiction (novels, novellas, short story and/or "flash" fiction collections), memoir, biography, poetry, narrative nonfiction, criticism, history (including intellectual history – how ideas develop over time), philosophy, theology, sociology, psychology, etc.

• Read a contemporary author followed by a classic.

• Subscribe to a literary or general readership magazine, not just something related to the sciences. Conversely, if you have a background in the humanities, consider subscribing to something with a scientific bent. Or visit your local library.

• Steal from the rich and give to the poor (i.e. apply to your own writing techniques that you've learned from others).

Before You Write

• Do your research. Not the kind you did in college, though maybe a little bit of that as well. Researching the "nature" part of our business and mission is the easy part. Nature is all around us, and answers can often be looked up in a book. The part that requires more forethought is the "people" part. People should be your subject even more so than nature.

• Make notes, ask questions of your subjects, form ideas for articles months in advance if necessary. Be prepared to not use every bit of your research. In the end, only 5% may be necessary.

• Know your audience.

As You Write

• Tell people something they don't already know.

• Who, what, where, when and why: remember to give readers the basic information they need. All of this

should come in the "lead," which is your opening paragraph.

• Pay attention to the visual appearance of your article. Are your paragraphs getting especially long? Are they all of equal length? A little variation is better. A one-sentence paragraph can really nail home a point. They're most effective at the very beginning, the very end, or approaching the climax of the story you're telling. One per article max, if at all.

• Avoid adverbs when you can. "The children sighed in exhaustion" is better than "The children sighed tiredly."

• Use the active voice and "strong" verbs whenever you can, and watch out for –ing words: "He was peering through binoculars" is not as strong as "He peered through binoculars."

• As above, avoid "weak" verbs when possible, though by no means always: am, are, was, were, be, being, been, has, had, have, etc.

• Don't foreground action with the perception of action. Instead of "I saw that the sky was blue" say "The sky was blue."

• Use exclamation points sparingly.

• Avoid ellipses unless the meaning is elliptical.

• If you use a cliché, make it fresh or don't use it at all.

• Avoid sentimentality, which comes across as false emotion.

• For the most part avoid words such as: in terms of, interesting, hopefully, seemingly, quite.

• Especially when telling a story (as opposed to introducing an annual report) avoid the overuse of Latinate words in English, which can sound clinical and bureaucratic. Mitigate, pragmatic, and disconsolate are but a few of many examples.

• Avoid the overuse of then to connote the passage of time and sequence of events. Most often a simple declarative sentence will do. Instead of "We caught insects in the native meadow, then we looked at them beneath the microscope" say something like "We caught insects in the native meadow on our hands and knees. Up in the Science Room, we looked at them beneath the microscope."

• Overwrite. Then revise.

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Tips (continued from page 6)

After You Write

- Don't be your own critic when writing. Be a critic later.
- Don't get so attached to your words that you can't get rid of excessive phrases and descriptions in later drafts.
- When you've finished writing the first full draft, set it aside for a day or two. When you go back to it, ask yourself:
- What's working in this article?
- What parts of it can be improved?
- Does it feel fresh and new?
- Do the techniques I've chosen to use enhance the article, or do they distract and detract?
- Have I exercised word economy? Does every word count?
- Ask yourself every hundred words, "Have I provided sufficient reason for my readers to keep reading?"
- Does my punctuation enhance the rhythm of the reading experience? ("No iron can stab the heart with such force as a period put just at the right place," wrote Isaac Babel.)
- Read your writing out loud.
- Be playful. Make sure you have shown – not just told – how much you love your job. Because you do love your job, don't you? You had better, because *you* get to connect people and nature for a living!

Jeremy Lloyd, Great Smoky Mountains Institute at Tremont Townsend, TN

Award (continued from page 5)

saying in dialogue format, word for word. In another exercise, use gestures (physical and facial) to describe the emotional states of children.

- Read! – Widely and deeply. Break out of your routine and try something new. Perhaps a book from the new generation of nature writers, such as Kathleen Jamie, Robert Macfarlane, or Philip Connors.

At the End of the Day

Imagine a person finding your newsletter in their mailbox at the end of a long work day. They've likely already far exceeded the amount of information it's possible to absorb in a single day. What are you giving them that pushes through the noise of every day life and carries them, for a few precious moments, to the earth and their favorite nature center?

In closing, allow me to make one more ambitious claim having to do with the business of transforming lives. This is, after all, the very basis for why nature centers and environmental education programs exist. To conserve and preserve natural resources, yes, but to change lives first in order for a conservation future to exist at all. If the goings-on at nature centers provide transformative experiences, shouldn't newsletters reflect that? Shouldn't the acts of writing and reading in some measure also be transformative?

As humans we read not just for information but for the transformative experience it provides. Read to become transformed. Write to transform others.

Jeremy Lloyd has been teaching environmental education at Great Smoky Mountains Institute at Tremont since 1996 where he directs summer camps and hiking programs and teaches courses in the Southern Appalachian Naturalist Certification Program. He earned an MFA in writing from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro in 2001 and is the author of two books: Great Smoky Mountains National Park Pocket Guide & Journal and A Home In Walker Valley: The Story of Tremont. He has also written for a number of publications including Gray's Sporting Journal, Sojourners, The Sun, Fourth Genre, and North Carolina Literary Review. Jeremy can be reached at Jeremy@gsmit.org

From The Field:

How to Price Your Programs

David Catlin
Senior Director of Field Support
National Audubon Society

The pricing of services has been referred to as one of the "dark arts"—it is part science, part experience, part trial-and-error. Yet it is important to master, because earned income is one of the sources of financial stability for many nature centers. And of those services, the biggest portion of earned income usually comes from program fees.

If there existed a simple formula for pricing programs, one that fit every nature center, this would be a pretty short article. But there isn't one. Like the relationship status of so many Facebook users, "It's complicated." However, what follows is some basic guidance.

Determine Your Costs

You should start by figuring out what your programs are costing you to produce. While it is unlikely that you will be able to recover all your program costs through fees, it is important to know what those costs are because it allows you to:

- Compare programs with one another. (If you discover that programming peripheral to your mission is less self-supporting than programming that is core to it, you may want to reevaluate your offerings.)
- Correctly represent the true cost of your programs to funders.
- Recognize when a service you hope will create an earned income surplus (like space rentals) is in fact losing you money.

The cost to provide any product or service, whether it is a field guide, educational programming, or something else, is a combination of both direct and indirect costs. Direct costs are any that contribute solely to the product or service in question. In the case of programming, your direct costs include the staff time required to prepare and present the program, travel costs (for off-site programs), and any materials or tools used exclusively for that program.

photo by David Catlin

Family canoeing on Wekiva River in Florida.

More difficult to track are the indirect costs, also known as "overhead." These are the dollars you must spend just to be open, and they include everything from the paper towels in the restroom to the electric bill to the salary of your office manager to depreciation on the building. To appreciate the true cost of offering programs, you need to calculate both their direct and indirect costs.

But how do you calculate what percentage of your center's overall indirect costs to assign to any given program?

There is no way that is both simple and entirely accurate. However, what is important is that you use a formula that you can both replicate and justify. Here is one way to do it:

1. Look at your annual budget. Identify all those expenditures that contribute directly to your mission-defined outcomes—depending on your mission, this might include not just education programs, but interpretive interactions at the front desk and on the phone, or even on-the-ground management activities related to conservation objectives for species and habitats. (For example, the dollars associated with a controlled burn of prairie chicken habitat would be a direct cost, assuming your mission encompasses the management of rare species. Money spent on roof maintenance or septic field repair would not.) The salaries of some staff will count completely as direct costs, while others will be completely in the indirect category, and some will be split between the two. Assign a dollar value to volunteer labor (see http://www.independentsector.org/volunteer_time) and other in-kind contributions. These calculations will require some "judgment calls," but the biggest expenditures should be relatively easy to categorize.

2.Total your direct and indirect costs for the year. Divide your indirect costs by your direct costs, and multiply by 100. The resulting

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figure is your percent of overhead. For example, assume your annual budget (including the value of volunteer hours and in-kind goods and services) is $500,000. Of that, $350,000 is direct costs and $150,000 is indirect. Your overhead is ($150,000/$350,000) X 100=42.9%.

3. Use this average overhead figure in calculating the amount of overhead to assign to any individual program or activity. In other words, if the direct costs associated with your week-long, full-day summer day camp total $3,200, the indirect cost estimate would be ($3,200 X .429)=$1,373 and your total cost would be ($3,200 + $1,373)=$4,573. If 20 kids attended the day camp, your cost per child would be ($4,573/20)=$228.65. If you charge a fee less than this, you will have to underwrite your shortfall through contributions, endowment, or profits from some other part of your operation. If you charge more, the surplus you generate can help underwrite shortfalls of other programs or activities.

photo by David Catlin

Nature preschool activity at Schlitz Audubon Nature Center.

Check Your Competition

The other piece of research you should do before establishing (or changing) your program fees is check to see what your "competition" is charging for similar experiences. Your competition is not just other nature centers in your community. It is the provider of any experience your customers might choose over the ones that you are offering. If your customers are school teachers and their classes, your competition is everyplace else they might go on a field trip—the local zoo or museum, or even hospitals and businesses that offer tours. If your customers are parents and grandparents seeking family entertainment in the outdoors, your competition may be the local parks department or even commercial outfitters.

Your intent here is not necessarily to compete on price. It is to understand what options your customers have, and how you can best find your own niche.

Create a Value Proposition

While it is important to know what your programs cost you to produce and what your competition is charging for similar offerings, these factors alone do not determine your pricing. Your costs have no relation to what your customers can or will pay, and the fact that competitors are charging bargain-basement fees doesn't mean you have to. The primary driver of your pricing should be the customer-perceived value of what you offer.

How do you establish that? Your existing programming already has a perceived value among your customers. Listen to them. Read their Facebook postings, online reviews, and tweets about your center. Ask them, both through surveys and informally. What do they like about your programs? What do they value the most? The answers to these questions will begin to tell you what your perceived value is.

You can change that value, though, and sometimes you should. With your board members, staff, and volunteers assess what you can offer that no one else does. Play to your strengths as well as to the gaps in the marketplace. What do you have that no competitor has? Is your setting unique? Are your educators more talented and better trained? Does your adult-to-participant ratio provide an especially personal experience? Can you build into your "general public" programs a social-interaction element that customers won't find elsewhere?

Then, put your uniqueness into a 30-second description. This is the value statement (or value proposition) for your program. Advertise it, deliver it, and set your pricing based on it.

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Price (continued from page 9)

Program Pricing Tips

Here are a few final tips about setting program fees:

• Don't price your programs to fit the customers who are least able to pay. It may be that the Title I schools in your market, for example, can't afford more than $5/student, even though other schools will pay $8 or $10/student. You can still charge higher prices—just use the extra revenue contributed by more affluent schools to offer discounts to poorer ones. For instance, provide coupons good during off-peak times to Title I schools.

• Another strategy to accommodate price-sensitive customers is to offer "good-better-best" versions of your programs, and price them accordingly.

• When you are offering programs that can be grouped as a "series"—a sequence of special birding field trips, for instance, or monthly "Nature and the Arts" events over the winter—take a cue from music and theater nonprofits, and offer a "season ticket" that represents a discount from the single-event fees.

• If you decide to increase the price of existing programs, it may reduce customer resistance if you increase their perceived value at the same time. (Just make sure any improvements don't cost you more than the increased revenue can cover!)

• Do participants comment frequently on what a "great deal" your programs are? If so, you are probably undercharging.

David Catlin is Senior Director of Field Support for Education & Centers for the National Audubon Society. In that position, he coordinates Audubon's support to its 43 nature centers across the U.S.—support that includes conservation planning, curriculum development, staff selection and training, financial management, branding and marketing, and program evaluation. He also leads the organization's effort to develop new centers. Prior to joining Audubon in 2000, Catlin worked 16 years for the Missouri Department of Conservation, 10 as manager of the Springfield Conservation Nature Center and six as an interpretive planner. He is the immediate past president of ANCA. Catlin has a degree in Natural Resources-Environmental Education from Michigan State University and a Masters in Outdoor Recreation-Interpretation from the University of Washington. He continues to live and work in Springfield, Missouri.

The Troverts

Hiking the Appalachian Trail

$5^{1/2}$ months ago ANCA board member Cynthia Harrell and her husband Woody (trail name, *The Troverts - X and N*) embarked on the trip of a lifetime. They "hit the trail" on April 11th in Georgia and started hiking north toward Maine on the Appalachian Trail. On September 25, 2012 they reached the summit of Mt. Katahdin and completed their journey - 2,184 miles later!

The Troverts issued a challenge to ANCA while on the trail. "We believe ANCA does important work. Before we started our hike, we offered $2,184 of our own savings (one dollar for each mile of the AT, whether we finished or not) as a challenge grant to help the organization do more. The ANCA board accepted our challenge, agreeing to raise the matching funds on a two for one basis, since two of us were walking."

The board has successfully matched the first $2,184 and is well on the way to matching the second.

Trail Journal Entry Sept. 27th: "We're lucky to have our Base Camp Manager to serve as our chauffeur as we ride to I-95 and head south towards the Manchester NH airport. As we cross the Kennebec River, last seen by us from a canoe at Caratunk, N realizes this is the same river where as a National Park Service representative he saw the destroyer U.S.S. Shiloh (CG-67) launched 22 years ago this month. Somehow things have come full circle. At lunchtime we find a great little lobster shack right on the waterfront in South Freeport, Maine; and then stop by the L. L. Bean flagship store to get X some size 8 pants to replace all those useless size 12's in the closet back home. Tomorrow we have a predawn flight back to Nashville."

The Troverts on day 1 of their $5^{1/2}$ month Appalachian Trail trek. Check out their journal here.

The Troverts atop Mt. Katahdin - the northern terminus of the Appalachian Trail - 2,184 miles from where they began in Georgia.

The Troverts' Stats

- ~ 169 total days
- ~ 154 days of hiking
- ~ 15 days of no hiking
- ~ 13 miles averaged per day
- ~ 23 miles was the longest day hiked
- ~ 3 miles was the shortest day hiked
- ~ 7 days hiking more than 20 miles
- ~ 281 miles was the longest section of trail hiked with no days off
- ~ 50 nights spent in a tent
- ~ 462 candy bars eaten
- ~ 231 Cliff bars devoured
- ~ 800 liters of Gatorade guzzled
- ~ 2,184 total miles hiked!

Profile:

Baltimore Woods Nature Center
Dashboards Help Steer Nature Centers on Rough Roads

Patty Weisse
Executive Director
Baltimore Woods Nature Center
Marcellus, NY

Philip Mazza
President of the Board
Baltimore Woods Nature Center
Marcellus, NY

Good governance thrives on effective communication. Keeping an organization's board, staff, and volunteers focused on the important, strategic initiatives is essential in today's tough economy. How many times have directors complained about their boards micro-managing? I have been guilty of this myself. In hindsight, I realize that the way I communicate information to my board can invite micro-management. It also can encourage a high-functioning, strategic focus.

The relationship between the executive director and board president or chair is critical to quality communication and governance. At Baltimore Woods, we have been fortunate to have Phil Mazza as our board president for the past two years. Phil is the Chief Human Resources Officer for one of our region's large employers. He also is a member of their board of directors and general manager of one the company's several corporate units. He proposed we rework our board reports into an organizational scorecard report format that, once it was put into place it elevated our entire organization performance.

Our scorecard is just one of many good "organizational dashboard" approaches to board reporting.

Your car's dashboard gives you a quick and reliable way to know whether you should speed up, slow down, or get something checked, repaired, or replenished at the next available opportunity. Just as you don't need to know every detail about your engine's performance and fluid levels; your board doesn't need to know every detail of what goes on at your nature center.

photo courtesy of Baltimore Woods Nature Center

An organizational dashboard is a quick and reliable tool to use for steering your center on rough roads.

Governance is one of the primary roles of a board. Developing a dashboard that gives your board a quick and consistent way to understand your nature center's financial condition, cash flow, high-level key performance indicators, and progress towards strategic plans should keep your board focused on their governance role. Having the numbers juxtaposed against past performance gives board members the baseline performance that builds confidence and perspective.

The dashboard for Baltimore Woods has four sections:

1. Financial and Performance Indicator section contains a collapsed profit and loss with comparisons to total budget, year to date budget, as well as previous year comparison. It also contains a snapshot of cash position as well as program attendance, volunteer data, and membership data.

2. Strategic Plan and Key Priorities section is where our main strategic goals are listed along with monthly progress updates on each goal. This is where our mission's impact in the community is articulated. Here, we first took our strategic plan and crafted simple-to-read strategic theme statements designed to capture our goals. Every month we now report our specific actions by theme.

3. Committee Reports section is where standing and ad-hoc committees provide brief summaries of their meetings and progress. In most cases, their actions relate back to our strategic themes.

4. Upcoming Events and Key

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Action Items section contains a complete monthly listing looking ahead a year for key events and action targets. We include targets for our annual planning and budgeting process in this section. This is our calendar of "to-do's." But it does change based on what we believe needs to be reviewed strategically and when. It is fluid. The key is this: we now have a historical reference that is carried-forward into the next year.

From a board perspective the dashboard has given board meetings a laser-like focus. At each meeting, we methodically review each section, one-by-one, asking the difficult questions as to help explain changing data and information. We have become a data-driven organization focusing resources on critical metrics that are the organization's life-line. Because of this focus we have seen increased board engagement, small ad-hoc groups forming to tackle an issue, more ideas flowing as to how to make improvements. Also, there can be no hiding from problems.

The board also now views data in a trend-like manner. Recently, the board established data goals regarding critical summer programs, this a result of negative trends. Additionally, board discussions are ever-centered on our strategic plan because our strategic themes are in front of the board each month.

Finally, staff members are more engaged as they too receive the scorecard. The strategic themes stay at the forefront as does all the critical data. No secrets; no surprises.

We want our organizations to function strategically and proactively. If something important is missing from the report it is likely to surface as a problem sooner or later. No one wants to find out about a problem when it is already at the crisis level.

The executive director, board president, and members of the executive committee need to work together to evaluate whether the dashboard is communicating the right information in the most effective way. Good dashboards are dynamic. They can and should be periodically updated so that the organization's performance is accurately communicated at a high level. The executive director's insights into the mission, staff, and potential pitfalls insure the dashboard is measuring what's important and relevant to optimizing mission delivery.

We all know how difficult it is to resolve problems that reach crisis level. Having a dynamic, well-tuned dashboard to communicate high-level information to the board takes time and effort, but is worth it in more proactive, focused, and strategic governance and management decisions. Our boards are tremendous allies and supports for our mission efforts. If we want them working with us on the right things that move our nature centers forward, we need to give them the right information to do their job well.

Our dashboard is an effective tool that allows us to filter out the noise and listen to what is most important.

photo courtesy of Baltimore Woods Nature Center

Baltimore Woods Nature Center uses a dashboard that gives its board a consistent way to understand the center's programs and financial condition.

Patty Weisse, executive director at Baltimore Woods Nature Center has a BS and MS in geology and taught geology at Wellesley College for three years before spending ten years as a secondary science educator. Her switch from the formal education setting to the informal setting at Baltimore Woods was fueled by a desire to support schools with their science teaching challenges. She created the Nature in the City program for urban elementary schools and was awarded the Social Entrepreneur of the Year Award from Syracuse University's Whitman School of Management in 2012. Weisse is serving as treasurer of the board of directors of the Association of Nature Center Administrators and is a member of the Marcellus Rotary.

Philip Mazza, president of the Baltimore Woods Nature Center board, is a human resources pro-

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DASHBOARDS (cont. from page 12)

fessional with over 25 years experience. He has held senior management positions with nationally renowned companies like Kemper Insurance, Barnes and Noble, and Intermedia Communications. Currently, Philip is the chief human resources officer for Byrne Dairy and general manager of its warehousing company, Syracuse Cold Storage. He is also a member of the board of directors of the Byrne Dairy Group. Also, Philip has instructed undergraduate courses in human resources management at both LeMoyne College and Bryant and Stratton College. Philip has presented at several conferences providing insight into human resources policies and procedures and good management practices. He has also published several articles related to leadership and management and has his MBA.

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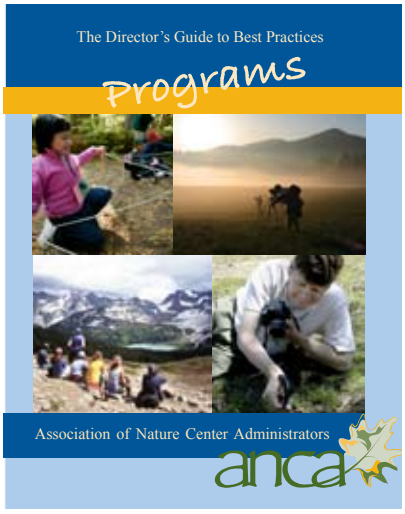

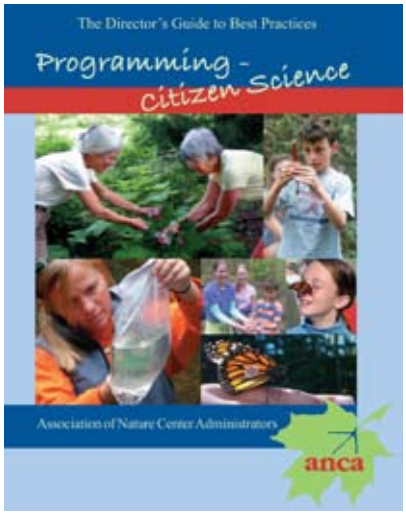

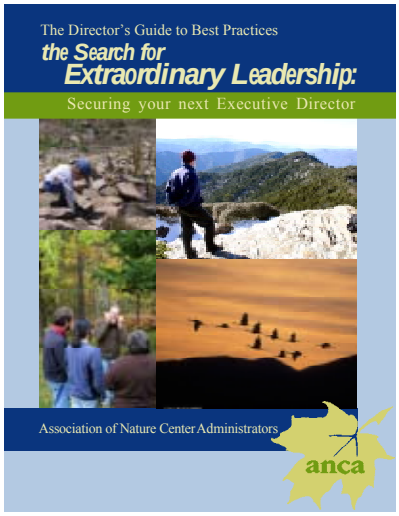

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