

Do You Want to Change the World? Will People Pay for That?

By Karen Eber Davis

Yes, people will pay to help you fulfill your mission if you engage, surprise, and delight them.

In just four years, would you like to:

- Grow your six-figure donors by 30%?
- Develop a new event that attracts 100,000 people?
- Earn 50% more from foundations such as Carnegie, Gates, Rockefeller, and MacArthur?

While this article can't promise you those things, it will tell you how the New York Hall of Science (NYSCI) achieved these feats. It also shares six elements your nonprofit can use to emulate NYSCI's success.

NYSCI is changing the way we help children learn by creating educational models for STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) topics. Their STEM-based learning models engage children in fun, play, and excitement.

Hosting nearly a half million visitors per year, the New York Hall of Science was originally built for the 1964 World's Fair. Today, the site offers visitors 450 interactive STEM exhibits and more.

What's the Appeal?

1. A Recognized Challenge. The work of NYSCI responds to a national challenge to improve STEM education.

You: Even if your nonprofit isn't working on a Presidentially recognized challenge, such as STEM, it does face a challenge that addresses well-known needs in your field. To create partnerships like those enjoyed by NYSCI, design a solution to that challenge.



2. Value.

We can trace NYSCI's overwhelming success to the way its approach engages learners and creates delight. For example, ratios befuddle many middle school youth. Traditionally, teachers use word problems to teach kids about ratios. NYSCI uses a more creative approach.

When I visited the New York Hall of Science, Exhibit Projects Creative Director Peggy Monahan showed me how it's done. With an iPad she created a picture of me being stomped by a large foot. Then, using a paper-doll-like pair of pants on a stick, she created a picture of me dressed in clown pants. To create the desired effect, she used ratios so the pants were neither too big nor too little, but just right.

Now that you've viewed me in clown pants (see the photo below), visualize young teens making silly pictures with their friends while learning about ratios. Imagine the fun.

You: Design your proposals with appeal. Use joy, fresh thinking, and learner engagement.

3. Experience. New York City families have plenty of museum and excursion options. NYSCI has remained open for 50 years by mastering the art of captivating visitors.

You: Include your expertise in your solutions. Be *the* logical choice for your funding partnerships.



Peggy Monahan from the New York Hall of Science shows the author how clown pants can make learning about ratios fun for kids.

4. Leverage. What happens at NYSCI doesn't stay there. NYSCI uses its physical site as a learning incubator. The goal is to reach classrooms nationwide. NYSCI designs its models for classroom use and includes teacher education in its work. Models use readily available items, such as aluminum foil, to fit tight budgets.

You: To inspire partnerships like NYSCI, design your proposals to start at your site and move everywhere.

5. Location, Location, Location. Yes, NYSCI is located in New York City, close to a subway line. Transportation does provide NYSCI easy access to millions. However, this isn't Manhattan. It's "all the way out to Flushing." NYSCI's location makes it "scrappy." Its Queens neighborhood means that its employees have the opportunity to test their ideas with people who reflect America's growing diversity.


You: As you think about seeking partnership with foundations or individuals to create extraordinary impact, you'll undoubtedly moan about some aspect of your location. Turn this around. Find your advantage.

6. A Culture of Yes. The NYSCI staff said yes to my request for an interview about nonprofit income opportunity. Not everyone does.

You: A culture of "yes" is subtle but critical. Partnerships require openness. To succeed, especially with fiscal partners, you need to balance your nonprofit's needs with your partner's needs. Are you ready to say yes, a lot?

“Design your proposals to start at your site and move everywhere.”

Create Partnerships, Grow Your Impact, & Obtain Income

The world you want to change may be as significant as STEM education in America. It might be mid-sized or small and still be critical. Whatever the size of the challenge, use the six NYSCI elements. Apply them to get people excited about investing in your work. 



Karen Eber Davis (karen@kedconsult.com) is an expert in maximizing philanthropic impact and the author of Nonprofit Income Streams: Open the Floodgates to Sustainability! Sign up for her free newsletter "Added Value" at kedconsult.com.

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