
Community Presenters' Network Advocacy Starter Guide

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The Community Presenters' Network (CPN) was formed in January 2017 as a direct result of the efforts of venue managers in small facilities and rural communities across Ontario coming together to build a network that met their needs. The CPN is now taking the next step in its development: forging a collective response to the individual challenges of making the case for arts and culture in small communities.

The Starter Guide below is based on research into advocacy and debates on cultural value, as well as interviews with 20 individuals in Ontario, Yukon and Atlantic Canada — all involved in different ways in the rural cultural ecology — to better understand the opportunities and obstacles that CPN members could collaborate to tackle.

The statistics and stories are out there to support the work of rural arts presenters; however, one of the main issues to overcome is **incomprehension**, both from policy-makers and the public. **This disconnect is systemic.** CPN has already identified the need for concerted advocacy to reclaim the narrative, reposition “value” and work towards alignment. This Advocacy Starter Guide will go deeper into the 5 cornerstones of an effective advocacy campaign, with suggestions tailored to the CPN needs and resources, as well as quotes and links for further research and inspiration.



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1. VISION

Effective advocacy is led by strong values and ambitious desired outcomes.

Compelling collective advocacy is driven by a clear shared vision. The changes needed to reach the network’s strategic goals don’t start or end with more money: what is required is a lasting, genuine shift in attitudes and perspectives that reshapes power relations and priorities.

ADVOCATING FOR BETTER UNDERSTANDING

“Advocacy (...) is not only about ‘more subsidies’: desirable improvements can concern funding systems that suit the reality of the field, better overall working conditions, a more inclusive sector, a stronger role for the arts in society, access to culture for all... to achieve this, **people in decision-making positions need to better understand how the arts sector works.** Advocacy should aim to achieve positive, structural changes in the performing arts system to make it fit to the needs of people working in it.”

[IETM Fresh Perspectives, A for Advocacy \(p. 7\)](#)

This advocacy vision could take the form of a manifesto, charter or set of principles, like the HIGH FIVE framework for children’s sport and recreation programming, which invites for collaboration between different sectors and levels of decision-making in order to enable the conditions for children to thrive.

HIGH FIVE: A QUALITY ASSESSMENT FRAMEWORK based on five principles of healthy child development

VISION: Through sustained involvement in quality programs, all children aged 6 to 12 are experiencing healthy development.

PRINCIPLES

- A Caring Adult
- The opportunity to make Friends
- The opportunity to Play
- The opportunity to Master Skills
- The opportunity to Participate

FORMULATING AN ADVOCACY VISION

—> What are the ambitions of the CPN members? What are the key changes they want to see?

—> What are the goals and objectives of their advocacy efforts? How clearly are they currently articulated?

2. MESSAGES

To rewrite the script and drive the conversation, the messages and values conveyed need to be clear, compelling and consistent.

This vision needs to be translated in a series of messages. We need to rewrite the script: it doesn't have to be hockey *or* theatre, and there are enough resources for both sport and culture in a well-rounded society if we shift our assessment of what matters.

The value of culture is a topic currently debated in academic and policy-making circles; cultural professionals are the best placed to move this conversation forward.

VIDEO: VALUE OF CULTURE

The City of Hamilton produced this short [“conversation starter” video](#) in 2012, when they were “on the heels of a cultural policy and on the brink of a cultural plan”, to position the debate on the value of arts & culture in an accessible way.

Here are three examples of how economic arguments and questions of value could be turned around.

A. Subsidised ≠ Failure

The Town of Minto renovated their volunteer-run local municipal theatre on the basis of the economic return on **investment in culture**, with 9 economic arguments presented to Council:

9 ECONOMIC ARGUMENTS FOR INVESTING IN CULTURE

- job growth (in the local construction sector, restaurants and retail establishments);
- strengthening of local cultural sector and diversification of cultural offer;
- fostering creative communities who generate economic value by supporting innovation, resilience and quality enhancement;
- improving the ability to attract skilled workers;
- sharpening local tourism's competitive advantage;
- spawning “spin-off” businesses;
- contributing to the personal and social development of youth; and
- supporting urban renewal and revitalization.

(Belinda Wick, *Culture: An Economic Development Argument for Revitalizing the Norgan Theatre*, University of Waterloo, Economic Development Program, May 2007)

Another investment mechanism that represents a key driver of change in industry, technology and social sectors is “innovation” or “incubation” funding, at the moment rarely available in arts & culture settings. The Metcalf Foundation has recently been supporting a cohort of Toronto-based performing arts organisations to undertake [Small Experimentations with Radical Intent \(SERIs\)](#) – inexpensive rapid prototyping projects designed to test assumptions about what could bring change and to generate learning that can then be scaled up.

CULTURAL INVESTMENT AS PROMOTION OF INNOVATION

A frequent argument of politicians against public funding for the arts is that ‘If you need public subsidies it means that your work is not good, otherwise you would be able to sustain yourself’. **But if a need for subsidies is a proof of failure, then the bank system and the industry have proved to be real failures based on the enormous subsidies they get.** Cultural subsidies are considerably less in volume and they are being administered in a more transparent manner than those of any other sector; only, the same kind of subsidies are allocated to tech companies and others under the name of ‘**promotion of innovation**’.

V. Shishkova, quoted in IETM’s [A for Advocacy toolkit](#) (p. 14)

INVESTING IN CULTURE

—> **Who do economic arguments speak to most? How can CPN members utilize them without diminishing the holistic value of their work?**

—> **How can CPN and CPN members position themselves as innovation partners?**

B. Value ≠ Money

Trying to prove the value of culture by equating “value” with “money” forces us to focus the arguments on economic impact only, at the detriment of other types of impacts and values.

CULTURAL VALUE: CHANGING THE NARRATIVE

Far too often the way people experience culture takes second place to its impact on phenomena such as the economy, cities or health. There are two problems about displacing attention in this way. In the first place it leads to a neglect of such issues as reflectiveness, empathy and imagination that have as their starting point individual experience. And, secondly, it ignores the fact that some of the most important contributions of arts and culture to other areas are embedded in that individual experience: perhaps not economic impact but rather the capacity to be economically innovative and creative; perhaps not urban regeneration driven by large new cultural buildings but rather the way small-scale arts assets and activities might help communities and neighbourhoods; and for health not just clinical arts therapies but also the link between arts engagement and supporting recovery from physical and mental illness. For all these reasons, **thinking about cultural value needs to give far more attention to the way people experience their engagement with arts and culture, to be grounded in what it means to produce or consume them or, increasingly as digital technologies advance as part of people’s lives, to do both at the same time.**

[Geoffrey Crossick & Patrycja Kaszynska, Understanding the value of arts & culture: The AHRC Cultural Value Project, 2016 \(p. 7\)](#)

Recalibrating “value” represents a radical shift that can’t be tackled in isolation. A follow-up research project to the Cultural Value Project quoted above identified, after consultations with 200

hundred people from the arts and culture sector, funding organizations, the voluntary sector, academia, and policy, that “**one of the biggest and most pressing challenges in understanding cultural value is creating communities of interest and practice across these sectors**”.

REDEFINING CULTURAL VALUE

—> Who does this argument speak to most?

—> How can CPN members contribute to the wider discussion on cultural value and benefit from the efforts to shift away from financial measures of cultural value and towards more holistic definitions?

C. From Value to Values

LEVERAGING VALUES

« No campaign, communication, policy or institution is ever value-free. Recognising this—and the impact of values on behaviour—the question instead becomes *which values do we want to endorse?* ».

[Common Cause Handbook, Public Interest Research Centre, 2011](#)

Effective advocacy is structured on a set of shared values that unite contributors to the cause and guide their actions. **Values** are an expression of the vision and principles that bind the network together; values-based communication is an effective way to invite for collaboration and influence change in attitudes and perspectives.

For examples of how values can be used to frame communication, see Common Cause’s handbook on [Ways to Promoting Positive Values in Arts & Cultural Settings](#).

VALUES AS FRAMES

—> How can CPN members identify their shared values to inform coherent and targeted advocacy messages?

3. TACTICS

New ways of doing and thinking gain power when they are put into practice. Project-based and transparent advocacy can build trust and capacity within the network.

Advocacy is a long-haul journey that requires a tactical approach: a series of campaigns and actions, sustained by research projects and monitoring mechanisms. **Learning in public through an “advocacy diary” shared blog or platform could link up and amplify network members’ efforts.**

ADVOCACY: THE DARK ART OF INFLUENCING POLICY

(...) The fundamental lesson is that it is not enough to be right. The problem of translating insight into action is not simple. **For all the emphasis on evidence-based policy-making, decisions are not taken in a purely rational way.** Of course, the job of officials and ministers is to take the difficult decisions, to reconcile the irreconcilable. It is what they are paid for. **But organisations seeking to influence the result need themselves to acknowledge the dilemmas that policy-makers face; resources, political and financial, are finite, politicians and officials need to balance a wide variety of risks, and often – perhaps always – progress on one front carries costs elsewhere.**

Successful advocacy needs low-key, detailed and long-term engagement, demanding in-depth knowledge of personalities and structures, compromise and strategic timing. It needs to start from a point of understanding the policy process, and the political realities that face decision-makers at all levels. Governments, for their part, could certainly afford to be more open in acknowledging their constraints, or lack of capacity. But unless advocates meet them in the middle, conversation degenerates to mutual incomprehension. And simply shouting louder does no more than burn credibility and alienate those that advocacy is intended to influence.

[*Ben Shepherd, The Guardian, 2013*](#)

A. Embedded advocacy

Embedding advocacy into campaigns and actions is a way to build trust and capacity within the network and to give it increased visibility and credibility. Several types of approaches can be developed for different goals and target groups. To be effective, they need to be **realistic, incremental, sustained and consistently documented.**

Collective public advocacy needs to be grounded in shared principles, in particular to ensure that:

- all messages are aligned** with the network’s common vision and values;
- the communication methods and formats chosen are **feasible and sustainable**, with provision made for continuous communication (e.g. avoiding “abandoned” social media pages);
- the public platform conveys a **positive and professional image** of the network at all times (e.g. with consistent editing and formatting).

B. Advocacy Diaries

Documentation is key to organisational memory and capacity growth; it’s also a powerful communication tool, turning advocacy efforts into a public conversation by publishing a vision /

manifesto, declaring goals and hopes and publicizing the efforts and resources engaged to reach them. The network could

These “advocacy diaries” would fulfil several functions at once:

- ➔ **KNOWING**: keeping up to date with political, social and economic changes (“policy watch”);
- ➔ **SHARING**: developing key messages and formats (eg “typical letter to MP”, presentation at Tourism Conference...) and making them public (as well as their responses / results), to try to maintain “persistent communications” beyond the immediate, constitute an archive, and chronicle hopes and gains big and small.
- ➔ **INSPIRING**: collect “good news stories” from the network and elsewhere that feed into the vision and ambitions of the network and provide inspiration and arguments.

C. Examples

- * **Arts Engage Canada**: a platform to share community outreach case studies
- * **New Theatre in your Neighbourhood**: a blog to chronicle a 3-year action-research touring project
- * **Future Arts Centres**: a collective blog for nine leading UK arts centres formed in 2013 to address the issues affecting arts centres.

ADVOCATING IN PUBLIC

- > **How much additional leverage could be gained from making CPN’s advocacy efforts public? Which allies and partners could support this transparency effort?**
- > **What would be the most effective platform (existing or new)?**
- > **Who is responsible for maintaining professional and up-to-date communications?**

4. PEOPLE

Find strength in numbers by aligning the network's advocacy goals with other networks, organizations and individuals with an overlapping agenda. Outreach and strategic alliances can help to leverage third-party advocacy and effectively reach targeted decision-makers.

Advocacy is about influencing power, so identifying who holds power and how to reach them is a key step in designing a campaign.

A. Identifying Targets, Allies & Opponents

A regularly updated chart of key people will help deliver targeted actions to key levels of influence.

Target	The person or group with the power to give you what you want. <i>Example: City Council member, Ontario Arts Council</i>
Constituents	People and/or organizations that agree with your issue and want to win the issue for the very same reasons you do. Their self-interest is the same as yours. <i>Examples: local artists, audience members</i>
Allies	People and/or organizations that agree with your issue but for reasons that are different. Their self-interest is different from yours, but they want the same thing as you. <i>Example: Vibrant Communities champions, education or well-being advocates...</i>
Opponents	People or organizations that are not on your side of an issue and who stand to lose something if you win your issue. <i>Example: a Council member hostile to cultural investment</i>

B. Influencing at different levels

Different levels of influence require customized approach and delivery. The following levels have been identified in interviews and research, with suggestions for efficient action.

Community level: local arts ecology, schools, libraries, local businesses and tourism operators... may all benefit from and participate in advocacy for arts & culture. How can joint messages be crafted and delivered?
Local government level: education and information can be delivered in the form of celebratory announcements, good news stories, clear and concise data appropriate to local context ("apple for apple").
Regional / provincial level: to have a voice and presence at key events and consultations, including sitting on funding juries and advisory committees, CPN members can coordinate delegation and establish alliances with other networks.
National / international network: this level may seem more remote to the needs of the network but could lead to increased visibility and credibility, for example through joining forces with peer networks (e.g. rural arts network in other provinces and countries...).

5. STRATEGY: an advocacy checklist

Advocacy is a long game that requires careful planning: who does what – and when? What resources should be allocated to which actions? What constitutes success? How can progress be measured and milestones celebrated?

Creating a checklist and timeline for advocacy actions will help to focus efforts and track outcomes. By keeping track all of the steps necessary to craft and deliver a message and by regularly updating a calendar of important dates for the different levels of campaigning (Council meetings, regional conferences, budget reviews...), members will be able to plan, deliver and evaluate their actions. Planning ahead for key events will also enable the network to take advantage of other arising opportunities.

ADVOCACY CHECKLIST: FROM RESEARCH TO BEST PRACTICE

Conduct Background Research

- Find out more about your representatives & officials: what is their voting record and general philosophy? What issues are they passionate about?
- Keep up to date with policy development

Develop Message & Delivery

- Create compelling messages: know your facts & audience, be positive & concise
- Include your advocacy messages in staff training and in print and digital communications
- Be prepared to answer questions about opposing arguments

Build relationships with representatives

- Invite elected officials to opening night and other key events in your season. Ensure board members or key staff members are on hand to host them and prepare your leaders with speaking points
- Find an opportunity during the season for public recognition of your representatives
- Establish an annual meeting between your staff and artistic leaders and elected officials to update them on achievements and challenges
- Distribute your season brochure to constituency offices, and put elected officials on your email and mailing lists
- Engage with elected officials on social media. Follow them and engage positively, especially when there's good news to share
- Look for opportunities to highlight your community engagement activities to elected officials. Consider what might make a great photo opportunity!
- Regularly review officials' newsletters and websites to see what they are focused on

Connect with your public funders

- Make sure you create a connection with potential funders before applying for a grant. Schedule regular meetings with your key contacts. Make sure they receive regular information about your activities and know your achievements, challenges and opportunities
- Attend relevant information sessions in your community or on-line
- Whether you liked the results or not, always seek feedback from funders, and listen carefully to their advice

Collaborate with other organizations

- Join city-wide or regional networks (such as arts councils)
- Consider establishing a regular get-together with colleagues at other arts organizations to share information and insights

Keep track of results

- Measure the efficiency of messages and delivery styles to identify best practice to replicate
- Celebrate achievements and share them widely with your stakeholders

adapted from [Orchestras Canada Advocacy Checklist](#) and [Advocacy Associates](#) resources

The following practices present a risk to the efficiency of an advocacy campaign:

- Lack of measurable objectives
- A target audience that is too broad
- Over-complicated messages
- Communicating too many messages or ideas at once
- Lack of internal support and leadership
- Inadequate budget
- Lack of planning
- Underestimating the value of commercial marketing and PR practices
- Lack of evaluation
- Lack of collaboration
- Lack of flexibility: not being nimble enough to take advantage of opportunities and current events that directly or indirectly impact on the campaign.

(source: IETM Toolkit, A for Advocacy)

CREATING AN ADVOCACY CHECKLIST & TIMELINE

—> **What actions are already regularly undertaken by members? What is the best way to share best practice?**

—> **What are the key opportunities to collaborate with partners and reach decision-makers in the next 12-24 months?**

—> **What preparation is needed for each of these opportunities? What outcomes can be expected for each?**

—> **Who is responsible for maintaining the calendar, including inputting actions and results?**

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

DATA

BIG DATA FOR SMALL PLACES

Rural Ontario Institute workbook for capacity building in data analysis and collection for rural community development

<http://bit.ly/bigdatasmallplaces>

ADVOCACY RESOURCES

Canadian Dance Assembly – advocacy section

Dance-focused, with many resources also relevant to performing arts advocacy in different contexts.

<http://www.cda-acd.ca/en/advocacy/index.htm>

IETM Toolkit: A for Advocacy

European-focused, with examples, arguments and links relevant to a global context.

https://www.ietm.org/en/system/files/publications/ietm_aforadvocacy_2018.pdf

FURTHER READING

CULTURAL VALUE AND THE CRISIS OF LEGITIMACY: WHY CULTURE NEEDS A DEMOCRATIC MANDATE (John Holden, DEMOS, 2006)

Arguments for the need for systemic change in repositioning cultural value

<https://www.demos.co.uk/files/Culturalvalueweb.pdf>

THE COMMON CAUSE HANDBOOK (Public Interest Research Centre, 2011)

A Guide to Values and Frames for Campaigners, Community Organisers, Civil Servants, Fundraisers, Educators, Social Entrepreneurs, Activists, Funders, Politicians, and everyone in between.

https://valuesandframes.org/resources/CCF_report_common_cause_handbook.pdf

THANK YOU

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