

Organization: Western Avenue Studios (Lowell, MA)

Workshop: Organically Grown in Lowell

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Random thoughts about strategies for growing your own.

1. Figure out what it is that you want. Keep it simple, focus on one main idea and keep it simple and straight forward.

- If you are not already a non-profit, think long and hard about what becoming a non-profit will mean to your project. An IRS 501(c)3 designation comes with a lot of requirements, figure out how these requirements will affect what your long term goals are.
- Articulate your vision. Do you want artist work space? Performance space? Gallery space?
- Be realistic in your expectations. The more basic your wants . . . the easier it is to find a way to meet those wants.

2. Develop a cohesive group of participants who share your common goal.

- Create a common means of communication within the group, a yahoo group, a google group, facebook . . . someplace where your supporters can discuss the project in an ongoing dialog and where follow ups can be done easily.
- Identify the strengths and weaknesses within your group, identify skill sets that will be useful.
- Be selective about your volunteers, make certain that volunteers are given projects that rely on their prior experience and skill sets.

3. Let people know what you want. Sounds simple, but too often we talk amongst ourselves about the things we would like to see happening and forget that there are folks out there who might be able to help. If you want space, you are going to need to connect with developers, building owners and real estate brokers.

- Connect with your local department of planning and development, or in smaller towns, your town planner or economic development office. Their job is to bring business and guide growth in your town, make sure that they understand that there are benefits to be gained by connecting developers to creative economy enterprises.
- Let your local politicians know what you want to do. Make sure you vote, show up at town meetings or city council meetings when you know that there are issues relevant to what you want to do. There is nothing more effective in getting support from your local government than a bunch of concerned citizens making their presence known.

3. Speak with one voice.

- Designate one individual to deal with entities outside your group. This is your liaison with the outside world, make certain that the liaison is involved at all steps of the process.
- A useful tactic for public meetings . . . let your liaison speak for the group, then have the group come up, one by one, state name and address and that they support the proposal.

4. Sweat equity is a good thing. When you look at space, look beyond what is there, to what could be. In order to keep costs low, be willing to trade amenities and do work yourselves.

- If you desire studio space, identify what your minimum needs are, let those minimums become the standard for every studio, then let individual artists build out their spaces to suit their needs.
- If you desire gallery space, remember that a gallery is about the artwork it contains, not about the grandeur of the space.
- Don't demand much from a developer, be willing to work with them.

5. Co-op galleries are strange beasts because they are often entirely dependent on volunteer labor, both to create and then to run efficiently.

- Before you contract for gallery space, identify how many members you will need to pay your rent, utilities, maintenance and promotional expenses. Do NOT proceed until you have signed on enough people to support the space.
- Create a clear and well defined business plan for the gallery and clearly identify what is expected of members. Gallery sitting is one commitment that people have the most difficulty with.
- Require a non-refundable buy-in from members to use for capital expenditures such as lighting, build out and furniture. Collect co-op dues quarterly and require a one year commitment from your members. Keep your commission low.
- Develop a space large enough so that you can provide members with space to continuously show their work and so that you can also provide them with an opportunity to do a one or two person show every year or two.
- Avoid taking free space in vacant storefronts. Going in, cleaning up a vacant space and making it look good is a boon for the property owner, but makes it much more likely that the vacant space will be rented out from under you. Nomadic galleries are a romantic concept, but in reality you need to be in the same place for a long time in order to build a client base.
- Spend every penny you can spare on promotion and advertising, but be canny about where you advertise. Request demographic info from any publication where you are planning on placing advertising, if they can't tell you who is reading them, don't give them your money.

6. Create a signature event and shamelessly promote it any and every way you can think of.

- Artists and artisans who do the show circuit are your absolute best promotional device, make sure they have postcards and informational materials about your event to take to their shows.
- Postcards are an excellent way to advertise an event, they are inexpensive and can be produced quickly. Use imagery that is visually interesting and that compels the viewer to hang on to the postcard.
- Well written press releases are an important tool, make certain that you provide good visuals with your press release.