

Essay #2:

Shaping First Impressions: Diversity, Design, and Developing Positive Customer Relations

by Kirsten Mullen

In one of the more unusual session openings of the workshop, Deollo Johnson of the National Coalition Building Institute reclaimed the \$100 he had taped to a chair on the front row (at least he told us it was legal tender). He then inferred that the money would have become the prize of the lucky person who had elected to sit down front. The point of this exercise was not explained, but he definitely got our attention.

The timing of this presentation was apt. I had been wishing for an opportunity to learn more about the workshop participants, and the morning of the second day was an ideal moment for this extended introduction process. Mr. Johnson's directive, "share your name, organization, and something delightful about yourself," was unique and yielded responses that prompted laughter, applause and knowing vocables of recognition. We are actively pursuing our dreams: several of us are engaged in ballroom and tap dancing, others are reveling in our new job statuses and feeling good about being able to do our jobs well. Still others are exploring the cities in which we live, have just returned from enriching vacations, are enjoying our grandchildren, experiencing the positive challenges associated with working with teens, becoming familiar with the empty nest syndrome after successfully sending five children to college, and reconnecting with our artistic selves.

Strictly confidential?

Mr. Johnson then elicited the group's consent ("raise your hand") that we would regard all personal revelations as confidential and would only tell stories that were legitimately ours to tell, that is, stories we either lived or witnessed. All raised their hands, but what

would have happened if someone had refused to go along? These were helpful guidelines for discussions of a sensitive nature, but it isn't clear whether they actually led workshop participants to be particularly revealing on this occasion. Some participants were attending with other members of their staffs, a happenstance that undoubtedly affected their responses throughout the workshop. Building trust takes time. One can understand Mr. Johnson's desire to create a relaxed atmosphere where mutual sharing might occur. Given the focus of his presentation, the coercive nature of his tactics should not have come as a surprise, but I found them unsettling nonetheless.

How many ways can you spell d-i-v-e-r-s-i-t-y?

At first blush, the group seemed eager to celebrate itself, celebrate others, and to "claim membership" in as many verbalized categories as were pertinent. Our mouths opened with shock and incredulity when two participants revealed that they were one of 13 and 15 siblings, respectively. It appears that being a member of a large family is not a form of diversity we had considered. We stared at the folk who claimed upwards of five memberships (Christian, middle child, North Carolina native, left-handed, etc.), some of us seemed irritated-- were we jealous that they held the floor for so long? Were we hostile to the actual list of groups to which they belonged? Did the list itself seem to trivialize group affiliations?

I was struck by the personal stories of privation offered when we were asked whether we had had "less than enough, more than enough, or enough" resources growing up. Whether one has sufficient resources is relative, beyond a bare subsistence threshold. Happiness is contingent on relative, not absolute income or wealth, but so many of us have been conditioned to believe we should have more. I affirmed that I had had more than enough natural wealth growing up, despite the fact that my single parent household was probably in the upper lower economic class. But compared to other families on our street and to most of the world's population, my family seemed to have had far more resources than we needed. The group's discussion of class, more than any

of the other categories, appeared to produce the most charged, negative energy. What are the many ways that we feed that sense of unworthiness in others? It would have been helpful to explore this area more extensively, perhaps having each person speak briefly or allowing pairs to explain to each other why they selected the categories they had chosen. Rearranging the chairs so that we could have seen each other's faces would have been helpful too.

Unexpectedly, sexuality, we were told, not race or class, is the most sensitive area of diversity awareness, especially among middle school-aged boys, and the taunt "You're gay," is said to be the most derogatory gibe we can toss. Given this introduction, it was not a surprise that no one stepped forward to "claim membership" in the gay or lesbian ranks, but if the law of averages is correct, at least five of us (there were approximately 50 workshop participants) are members. Creating a safe environment for discussions of this type is extremely difficult, but that actuality is not a sufficient reason to avoid them. We might do well to imagine there are always more lesbians and gays present than we recognize and act accordingly and be thoughtful.

Generally, participants engaged in animated conversations when they were asked to talk in pairs. These spirited exchanges were punctuated with smiles and enlivened the room as heads nodded in agreement or with understanding. It was instructive to ponder all of the ways in which our cultural heritages affect how we look at the world and the ways in which our early learning makes it difficult for us to serve others.

Contemplating the Other

Poignant and revealing comments were offered when participants were invited to share with a same race or ethnicity partner our first thoughts when contemplating the other. Both the uncensored cues we posed to partners and their replies were revealing. Generally, we are trained to suppress impolitic and offensive thoughts (even as our body language betrays us), but given permission to override these sensibilities, some

European Americans reached for emotion-filled language to describe African Americans: “welfare queen,” “low performers on standardized tests,” “fill our nation’s prisons.” Others offered terms typically perceived to be neutral or positive: “oppressed,” “angry,” “smart,” “Bill Cosby,” “very aware of the big divide,” “pride,” “heritage”). Several blacks felt sufficiently empowered to exchange harsh thoughts about European Americans: “oppressor,” “slaver,” “trailer trash,” “privileged,” “the devil,” “colorless.”

Mr. Johnson asked a European American participant how it felt to be objectified in this way by African Americans. S/he replied, tongue firmly in cheek, that s/he was pleased to be white and to be characterized in this manner. Then, turning serious, s/he added: “I was raised in North Carolina, raised to feel guilty. I realized early on that blacks had a great deal of rage and that it was justified, and I was saddened by it.” Unfortunately, this remark went uncommented upon. No one asked her/him what it had meant to be “raised to feel guilty.” Nor did anyone inquire about the incident(s) this individual observed which so enraged blacks in her/his acquaintance. Following up on statements such as this would have given the session greater meaning and may have helped to counter the widespread notion that extended discussions about race only exacerbate race relations.

Some blacks in the room laughed (knowingly?) when Mr. Johnson announced that “Guilt is the glue that holds discrimination in place”, and whites searched his face for understanding that was not forthcoming. These dynamics are complex and do not always lend themselves to easy explanations. I didn’t understand it either.

One white participant focused her/his comments on real black individuals in his/her acquaintance, not the group as a whole and revealed that her/his remarks were celebratory. A surprising number of European Americans indicated they had had little intimate contact with blacks; others indicated that they were raised to be “indifferent to

race," but did not explain, nor were they asked, what that meant.

All of this talk of stereotypes reminded me of the now-syndicated 1970s situation comedy, "All in the Family," and the Archie Bunker character, who regularly reintroduced viewers to negative ethnic and racial stereotypes. It was he who taught me that African Americans had been referred to as "jungle bunnies" and "spear chuckers." Have we been engaging in the same type of activity? How many children are aware of the terms we have slung around today? How will whites rid themselves of their belief that blacks are cognitively inferior? And how will blacks rid themselves of internalized self-hatred?

Bridging the Racial Gulf

"It is not our darkness that is feared, it's our greatness." -- attributed to Nelson Mandela

Some blacks in the group want whites to acknowledge blacks' current and historic pain and suffering. "But how do I initiate conversations about the struggles blacks have endured knowing that I'm the bad guy?" asked one European American. Whites need to be aware that this may not be a conversation blacks wish to have with them. "We're not defined by our suffering 24/7," said one African American. Several whites voiced a desire to be invited into blacks' circles, sparing them the identification of interloper and the possibility of rejection--"it's just too scary for me," one participant confided.

Many of us present seemed confounded by the black participants who painted pictures of the "fully integrated worlds" in which they were raised. We seem skeptical about the black Americans who say they were raised blind to racism or were rarely the targets of racially charged incidents. We looked on with amazement at the participant of African descent, whose partner is European American, who seemed to be sorting out race relations for her/himself for the first time at this very workshop.

Defusing Racist Conversations

Session leader Deollo Johnson urged participants to "Leave the terror and embrace the thrill" that can come from changing the way a colleague thinks. Below are some suggestions we discussed for disrupting racists in action:

1. When a racist remark is made in your presence, say "Ouch."
2. Or pause, then say, "Gee, I just don't know how to respond."
3. Plead ignorance by saying, "I don't think I know what you mean?"
4. After you have calmed down, speak with the individual privately.
5. Don't pretend that it's all right to speak this way in your presence. Signal your displeasure with your facial expression and posture.

Here are some ideas that were offered to help one's family counter society's negative messages about the other:

1. Invite people of different cultures to visit your home regularly (at least monthly).
2. Place your family in a situation in which you are the outsider, for example, a mosque, temple or storefront church; a music or dance performance at a small venue like a club (for example, Salsa Carolina) or neighborhood recreation center.
3. Always invite a member of another race or ethnic group to co-lead projects you are working on, for example, school or political committees.

On the job training: Responding to racist clients and colleagues

It takes energy, commitment and finesse to truly shift the attitudes of racist and ignorant clients and colleagues. Strive to avoid emotional responses because they are rarely effective. Avoid defensive responses too, because they are rarely received in the manner in which you intend. Verbal communications, we were told, are 30% tone, 60% body language, and 7% content. So listen for the content and, without allowing your tone of voice and body language to match theirs, find out why the speaker feels this way.

If you have had prior experience with this person, allow her/him to “air it out,” then identify the “ouch,” the source of the hurt or complaint.

I don't know whether it was the layout of the room (no writing surfaces), the content of Mr. Johnson's presentation, or the manner in which we tend to receive emotionally charged information, but very little note taking was observed until he got to the exercise where he created “word pictures.” Suddenly, three people on the back row took up their pens. Still, the group seemed engaged. This exercise required a great deal of interaction -- responding to the speaker's questions, offering anecdotes, pairing up and talking, but I am curious about its effectiveness. Do we “get” these lessons by experiencing them, by talking them through, or do we need to make notes we can refer to at some later date? What does the research say?

Learn to listen fully, respectfully, completely. Listening does not connote agreement. Generally, participants appeared to be in good spirits and were good sports while engaging in these exercises. We all appreciate being listened to, being heard, and having others express empathy for our situations.

Reality check

“How likely are we to question a customer who makes an offensive remark?” asked one participant. We are not likely to attempt these techniques if we fear the customer will walk away or report us to our managers. Still, forewarned is forearmed and having some idea about the type of response you would like to make is helpful.

The group as a whole seemed to enjoy stepping into these roles (shopkeeper, theatre director) and upending unpleasant situations. Mr. Johnson's presentation received the first applause and finger snapping (his suggestion) of the workshop. Several people approached him after the session with specific concerns and expressed a desire to

engage him to aid with attitude shifts at their institutions. Many expressed their appreciation for the opportunity to have this discussion.

Our all female luncheon group engaged in a wide-ranging and spirited conversation that included amazing nicknames we love and hate ("Piggy," "Puddin," "Pumpkin," and "Tit" -yes!); our love of or disdain for our given names; evolving naming practices (Matilda, Geraldine, Henrietta, once a commonplace, are rare today); the importance of networking; and growing to appreciate our partners in life. We were aware that the city's planned evening of entertainment, a band performance adjacent to the workshop hotel, is not on our agenda. "Maybe we can sneak away," one of us says wistfully, or attend as hired shoppers and say we were practicing what we've learned at the workshop. We appreciated the bountiful and toothsome lunch.

One on-the-job issue surfaced: The frustration of a staff member who is biracial but rarely encounters documents that enable her to fully identify her racial heritage leads each of us to wonder whether our institution's forms are sufficiently inclusive? Although problematic, we concluded that the forms need to be changed.

We told tales on ourselves and on our families, giggled and laughed out loud. Our brave admissions probably would not have been possible had we not experienced Mr. Johnson's presentation. Thank you for that!

*Case study in design: Duke University Museum of Art lobby
presented by Bruce Evans*

It was extremely difficult to see the architectural drawing Mr. Evans brought with him. His second visual, an infamous videotaped argument between a renowned architect and her/his client, was not shown. Twice Mr. Evans indicated that the excerpt he had

cued up was excellent, then he panned it as unnecessary and gave the audience the authority to decide whether it should be shown. Several people indicated frustration with his method during the break. Still, if he had screened the video would we have been able to see it on that small television screen?

Mr. Evans envisions Duke University's proposed art museum, "art in the woods," as spacious, with an inviting lobby, an ample kitchen for events, and room for expansion. Your connection to the public begins with the street approach and the institution's signage should reflect your mission and announce your presence, he told us. "Anything that brings people through the door is good," including making the institution available to "busloads of grade school-aged children."

The planning team is guided by its mission statement, which calls for a design with a welcoming approach, a facility that will share visitors with the adjacent Duke Gardens and literally come out to meet you. Mr. Evans encouraged participants whose institutions are contemplating a new construction project to build with expansion in mind. While the project is underway, systematically keep your constituents informed, he said. Make regular information sharing sessions with your staff, members, and donors part of the process.

Mr. Evans offered the following guidelines for new construction projects: celebrate each step of the journey, present them with small gifts, inform them about your site selection decisions and architectural design with maps, diagrams and three-dimensional models on-site and on your Web site, send press releases, newsletters, other publications. Fundraising for the project should continue apace and donors' requests should reign supreme.

“Shaping the Moment” with Brenda Howerton

For her part, Brenda Howerton staged a very deliberate opening, two openings actually, in her struggle to get our attention. She had a number of things working against her. First, the ground she was contracted to cover overlapped somewhat with that of the morning session, which had been intense, then she was fighting the post-prandial syndrome that can set in after a big lunch on a warm day. Using a variety of examples, she demonstrated that we are constantly judging each other-- assessing others' tone of voice, how they carry themselves, the content of their conversation. She frequently invited comments, responses, and impressions, but the group was slow to warm up to her. One participant found her/himself in hot water after deigning to take a cell phone call during her presentation. Ms. Howerton's style incorporates a call and response mode and she seems accustomed to a high level of interaction, but for the moment, this audience seems more inclined to listen passively.

The customer is to be valued and appreciated, and everyone on staff is responsible for her/his experience with our institution, we are told. At the same time, the customer is constantly assessing the level of service she/he is receiving. If the interaction takes place over the telephone, you must make an investment in the relationship and "be present to the phone," Ms. Howerton said. A participant who had attended a telephone techniques class shared an important tip he learned: "admit yourself," that is, give the caller your name as a signal that you are making a personal commitment to the caller. Always remember, if the customer is not happy, your organization cannot be happy.

“Humans are judging and assessing machines,” Ms. Howerton tells us, “and the only way to stem this tendency is to stop oneself in the moment and be aware of the power you have to change the nature of the interaction.” Clients need to feel comfortable with you at the unconscious level -- that is, eye contact, tone, body language. And they don't want to feel dumb. Your front desk staff is key. Missed opportunities to take care of customers and let them know you value their patronage abound.

In another exercise in which we were asked to develop a profile of the other--an individual or a group--my partner and I created an elaborate composite of a fellow workshop member whom neither of us had met. Was our portrait accurate? I doubt it. But the fact that we could concoct a profile, and in short order, is a reminder to us all that we are constantly judging and assessing others, filling in the missing details with perceived and inaccurate information.

Why do customers matter?

"I have a personal relationship to the theater, it has been extremely gratifying, and I want to share it," said one participant. "If I succeed at conveying this message, people will come and pay my salary."

In order to serve the customer well you must "choose to like her/him," said Ms. Howerton. (Music from the street is wafting through the walls making it difficult for us to concentrate.) Our job is to empower people to do what they want to do, according to the presenter, and service is a form of empowerment. "We want them to have what they want and the first step toward achieving this goal is to be extremely clear about your motives," she said. Attach yourself to the greater aim of what you're doing. Waiters nurture customers by feeding them. How do you and your staff nurture your customers?

This last exercise may have been the most instructive of them all and generated a great deal of discussion. In an effort to cause us to understand what active listening should be, Ms. Howerton instructed us to pair up and practice *active negative listening*. While one member of the pair attempted to describe a personal accomplishment of which they were extremely proud, her/his partner's assignment was to show disinterest and to be as rude as possible. What we discovered, somewhat counterintuitively, was that it is extremely difficult to actively ignore or undermine someone who is describing

something they care about deeply. I was the rude partner and found it physically painful to play the role. These are important findings because the primary reason customers boycott organizations is due to dissatisfaction with a company employee.

Next, we were allowed to reverse our tactics and become active listeners, an assignment we generally felt we could manage. But when Ms. Howerton asked us to recall our partners' physical characteristics—eye color, for instance, many of us had to take a second peek. Were we, indeed, good listeners? Be mindful about the things you can control during a conversation with customers-- your ability to listen and the state of mind you leave them in.

Buzz during the break: "Arts organizations need to reexamine their policies. Are we giving good customer service when we refuse to offer refunds? Some of us offer exchanges on a case-by-case basis, but we never do so as a matter of policy. Then there's the area of members only events and the fact that some members are more special than others."

"Who can green light a decision during an emergency? We need to adopt more business practices. Who are our customers? Donors only? Artists who work for us? Patrons who pay to attend our events?"

"Wow, swordfish! I can't believe this food."

Dinner discussion: What is one to do with young employees who seem to spend an inordinate amount of time fiddling with their beepers and talking on their cell phones? Are they actually engaged in downtime more than seasoned employees who may have learned to be more discreet and time their calls during non-peak stretches or who use email for their non-business exchanges? In this a case of ageism? How can we inculcate a more businesslike atmosphere among all of our staff members?

Website Design With Customer Service In Mind--A Panel Discussion

Moderated by Dr. Mitchell Owen, Specialist, Computer Training, North Carolina State University

Amy Wilmoth

Internet Communications Manager, Durham Convention and Visitors Bureau

We were shown screen captures from two excellent Web sites created for the Durham Convention and Visitors Bureau and the North Carolina Museum of Natural Sciences.

Below are Ms. Wilmoth's steps to creating a user-friendly Web site.

1. Know who your customer is and design with her/him in mind;
2. Make simple navigation your goal;
3. Include a wealth of information and provide easy access to related options;
4. Delete unrelated material; and
5. Include multiple criteria searches.

Should the Web be used for surveys? Yes, if you 1) define the purpose of the survey, 2) make the request a narrow one, and 3) do not attempt to obtain demographic information at the same time that you collect survey data.

How do you keep your Web clients happy? Users have short attention spans so always smooth over problems with an apology and never rest on your laurels. The demands of the job are on-going.

Karen Kemp, Director of Public Relations, North Carolina Museum of Natural Sciences

Convince your institution that it must grow its own Web talent; don't go to a contractor if you can avoid it. If you want the site to be accurate and to change as your institution evolves, bring media savvy talent on-board or train an extant staff member. Your Web site does not have to imitate your organization's structure, but it should possess a structure users can access. Capitalize on your institution's unique features and offerings and provide links to related organizations. If a sister institution has produced a visual or auditory clip that might be of interest to your customers, provide a link to her site. Presently, the Museum samples an excellent audio recording of frog calls that was created by the Exploratorium in San Francisco. Don't reinvent the wheel.

Use the Web site to educate visitors about your institution before they arrive. Test your site on different computers, browsers, and platforms and find out how difficult it is to access the graphics for users who do not have state-of-the-art equipment and software. Always include your institution's phone number, street address, and staff names. Pay special attention to the search function and establish graphic design standards that are consistent from the site to the institution.

Create it and they will come

In a remarkable example of the power of Web advertising, the North Carolina Museum of Natural Sciences scored a coup with the well-timed release of images of a major dinosaur discovery on display at its Raleigh facility. Major publications ranging from *Time* and *Newsweek* to *USA Today* picked up the story and published a wave of stories that coincided with the Museum's opening. Make the most of what you have to show by investing in high resolution photographs and uploading detailed background information on your programs and collection and make them available to the press at no charge. And if your Web site is up and running and is easy to access, your

institution may receive the ripple of good buzz that only word of mouth can provide. Said one workshop attendee of the North Carolina Museum of Science Web site: "It is not just user friendly, it's 'user compassionate.'" Lastly, don't underestimate your Web site's potential as a billboard. Run text across the bottom of the screen announcing new programs, upcoming performances, lectures, and classes using attractive, interactive, and unobtrusive text and graphics.

Dianne Pledger

President and CEO, St. Joseph's Historic Foundation

"I was ignorant, unable to move forward" on the Foundation's Web site. A volunteer got the organization on the map, but was not able to edit the site or to provide ongoing maintenance," says Pledger. Now, they are contracting the service. "Find the money to purchase the expertise of a Web master," she advises. "It is an investment that will pay for itself."

"Your first page should be visually alluring-- it should jump out at you and engage not just African Americans, but everyone," Ms. Pledger instructs. But do be aware that African Americans are on the Web and that they are discriminating consumers. Use your site to build your audience--retain all email addresses and use them to expand your database. Your Web site can help you to keep an eye on fundraising, build your audience, offer merchandise for sale, and get the word out. Your constituents are happy to see your organization getting with the times. "Make the investment in a Web site or get left behind," Ms. Pledger counsels. Learn from your mistakes, ask for help and hire the experts. Let others know you exist on the Web and borrow techniques that work. For example, the Durham Convention and Visitors' Bureau produced a full-color postcard illustrating its Web page to send to its members. Ms. Pledger plans to emulate and encourages participants to do the same.

To insure your Web site's success:

1. Regularly update your content,
2. Plan for growth,
3. Make links to your other programs and to related organizations, and
4. Cultivate ownership – find ways to reward your Web site users and make their input part of your process.

Andy Berner

Associate Director of Development, Ackland Art Museum, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, North Carolina

Mr. Berner's organization's Web site is "a work in progress," so his advice is ideally pitched to Web site producers who are creating their first structure or seeking to impose structure on a poorly design site. The Museum's site has rich content, he said, but until he arrived, no single person or department had full responsibility for it; one result was a lack of structure and ease of navigation. Mr. Berner has been attending Internet conferences and reading trade publications to guide him as he works to impose coherence on the site. One of his goals is to convey a sense of the Museum's identity and character on the first page. Another goal is to determine what type of information his customers want from the site. This project is fraught with complications, not the least being "its presentation of control issues, always a challenge for an institution of control freaks." Outsourcing graphic design work is one example. How will the institution's style and production values be preserved if outsiders are responsible for content? But the Museum will persist, despite the expense and the time involved in its production because, "one must take the plunge and make the investment anyway, or so we're told," said Mr. Berner.

It's tough being the last speaker scheduled at the end of a 12-hour day. Andy Berner did not share any visual aides other than the outline of his presentation and a brief

bibliography, but the four participants who stayed until the end seemed eager to receive the message that he conveyed. Throughout his presentation they took copious notes and each participant approached him afterwards with additional questions and comments.

Dr. Mitchell Owen

Specialist, Computer Training, North Carolina State University

Dr. Mitch Owen succinctly summarized the advice offered by the evening's presenters: 1) know your customer, 2) plan well, 3) obtain good technical assistance from your organization's informational technology staff persons, 4) discover and emphasize your unique offerings, that is, tell your story, and 5) build to the future.