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Art for business's sake

The business community becomes stronger when the arts are supported

By **Jo Hawkins Donovan**, for *Small Business Times*

Many people I coach hold leadership positions in arts organizations in my community. It is a privilege to work with these executives who are so highly committed to their work.

I remember when I first moved to this city, more than 20 years ago, how impressed I was with the caliber of visual and performing arts available. I know we have a world-class museum, a world-class institute for art and design, a ballet company, a symphony orchestra, opera companies and theatre groups that fill us with delight and pride.

The business case for the arts is pretty well broadcast around this and any other city. We know when we want to attract new professionals to our town, we “show off” our many artistic venues. It’s quite well documented that our outstanding cultural community adds to the attraction and thus the growth, of our city.

Richard Florida has published a timely perspective on the relationship between creativity and the future of a city’s economy. His book, *The Rise of the Creative Class*, makes a good case for regional leaders taking a new look at creativity as an economic engine. Florida says we’ve got to be seen less as an industrial center and more of a creative center. “Fill the factories with art and music. Let’s be wild”, he urges. “It’s not just about the amenities of a city,” says Florida. He sees creativity and commerce as the same things.

Beyond business though, even beyond delight and pride — and more significant, is that part in each of us, that slice of your humanity and mine, that is touched by the experiences afforded us through these non-profit organizations.

Who has not felt time stand still when being drawn into a painting or transported by a breath-taking performance? I have so many memories of standing and applauding for all I’m worth, thinking how proud I am to be a part of this human race. I’ll think, yes, we are capable of slimy, deceitful behavior, we human beings. And yet we are capable of this too, this excellence, this collaboration, this giving from the top of our talents and the bottom of our hearts.

I always want every child in town to have that experience, to be in the presence of excellence, to resonate with the finest that we can produce as a species. Nearly every arts organization here supports programs designed toward that end. I think they bend over backwards to make it possible for anyone 4 or 94 years old to have access to the high level of achievement that flows out of artistic expression. “Come; leave your struggles behind for a while. Absorb the magic of a Georgia O’Keefe, or feel your spirit dancing atop the strings of Samantha George’s violin.”

So no problem, you might be thinking. We are immersed in that rich and diverse cultural community, true. The problem is that all of these arts groups are feeling the pinch of the economic squeeze that is disturbing the whole country.

Business owners who are announcing hiring freezes and salary cuts may feel they have to slash the amounts they customarily contribute toward our arts community. I encourage them to take a longer view, and consider the connection between supporting the arts and breathing new life in the economy. We need these groups and we need the quality that emanates from them to grow ever stronger, not to be diluted for lack of funding.

Commerce in our city has provided the oxygen that allowed the arts organizations to thrive. As a city, we need that life force to continue strong. We can’t expect our city to shine as brightly without our arts organizations. And we can’t expect them to forever provide us with the same caliber of inspiration and delight if funds are shrinking.

Granted, it may take creative thinking to figure out how to continue that support. I’ll bet though, that employees would enjoy being a part of that kind of brainstorming. I’ll bet too, that every arts organization in town would welcome collaborative partnerships in seeking solutions. It is just too important to cross our fingers and hope.

Then there are the rest of us (a bow to Jacqueline Mitchard). When fretting over our individual budgets, we can choose to “cut” somewhere else, and continue our support for the arts, through cash contributions and season subscriptions. We can give a birthday gift of a pair of symphony tickets instead of some useless trinket. We can respond to the many invitations we receive in the mail for fund-raising events. We can attend more of them — and be entertained well in the process. We can simply be mindful that this is the time for us to demonstrate our appreciation for all we have. It will not magically continue.

We can honor these words of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe: “One should, every day at least, hear a little song, read a good poem, see a fine picture and, if possible, speak a few reasonable words.”

I wish you many days filled with the best of song, pictures and words.



Jo Hawkins Donovan has a coaching and psychotherapy firm in Whitefish Bay, and can be reached at 414-332-0300, or jo@hawkinsdonovan.com. The firm’s Web site is www.hawkinsdonovan.com.