



Adjacent Opportunities: Cultivating the Emergent Constituency

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Engaging an audience to buy-in to what is being offered has been the goal of advertisers, scientists, salespeople, politicians, hate mongers, social activists, professors, all the world's religions and entrepreneurs trying to fill every enterprising nook they might possibly exploit, to name just a few. And to go along with those selling their ideas and products, there are a myriad of experts who want to sell what they know about how to make that sale.

In my test bed for 'getting the word out' known as the *International Social Action Film Festival*, I have watched hours of films about social activists, charities and the work of non-profits and NGOs. They share a number of common issues. First, the majority have no idea how to tell a compelling story about social change, and second they have little notion of the constituency required to develop an audience that will support them. The prevailing perception is that everyone will want to know. But when engaged in engaging others, "All the World is *Not* a Stage." If you think your audience is everyone, you may find yourself sitting alone.

The comedian, Steven Wright, once made the observation, "I don't want everything. Where would I put it?" And as we begin to look at how to engage the emergent process of developing an audience for our ideas, we have to start looking at the fact that what we think is not necessarily for everyone. Because, of course, if everyone showed up, where would we put them?

The emergent aspect of building any audience rests on its foundation. Successful self-organization is always bounded in some fashion, and unless there is a clear and resilient boundary within which to amass those who will show up, and the emergent properties that will invariably be unleashed, people simply won't stick around. The foundation of any audience is what I call the *constituency of need*. If there are not people who have a strong need for what you are offering, no matter how well you build it, they won't show up.

Providing that those who make up this constituency of need aren't too neurotic, the interactions of this group, as long as it is has become informed as a group around the offering, will lead to a level of emergence that will attract the next and broader level of constituency—that of interest. The difference here between constituency and the idea of community, is that a constituency is a body that is being served, while a community may provide services to, and by, its members for its members. A constituency is more dependent on what is being offered to it, rather than what it might do for others. If perhaps our political representatives were truly up to their founding ideals, they might view those they serve more as a community than a constituency. This would also require a level of participatory citizenship and responsibility from that community, rather than being a group that abdicates to the server delivering to the served. However, we'll leave that particular discussion to another column.

So how do we, who are proffering our intellectual wares and property, build an emergent constituency who will help spread the word we want to get out? Lisa Schneiderman, a Hollywood-trained, socially responsible brand builder and publicity coach, whose own work is about the intersection and interaction between pop culture and social action, believes that it begins with what she calls the “Fan Base.” And the way she recommends building this base for new ideas and products is by, first, establishing the demographics of those that want or need your thinking—the constituency of need. Then once that group has been activated, we can identify which organizations and/or enterprises are similar to the ideas or products being put forth and then we can ally or partner with those that already have a healthy pre-existing fan base—a broader constituency of interest

Lying at the heart of growing and developing this audience, Schneiderman believes, is the creation of a compelling call to action around which these constituencies can rally and create a connection to the message, and as Schneiderman suggests, be “inspired to associate with the cause or product.” This is where communities begin to emerge from interacting constituencies of interest and the word begins to spread. Just putting the word out and hoping that it’s heard because it’s the right formulation of words is not enough. We must set up opportunities for constituencies to interact around a clear brand-strategy that can, in turn, initiate networks that build communities formulated around the call to action. It is when networked constituencies begin to interact together that galvanized communities form and a message can be launched on an emergent and viral trajectory, all of which was triggered by the originating constituency of need—the fan base—that first resonated with the concept, cause or product.

What compelled and attracted that founding organization was their need. It wasn’t the need of the entrepreneur or the academician, but rather the need of those who were being served. We often think that new ideas or products will spread because people will find them interesting or at least should.

Eventually this may be so, but if we are planning on building an audience that will stay beyond that first look, it must be built by tapping into the “fan base” who finds their need satisfied to the extent that they are willing to engage with others who have felt likewise. Without the generation of that interaction, nothing new can emerge beyond its founding.

How many great discoveries, products or causes have died because they were unable to identify and then compel the constituency who really needed what they were offering? The historic field is littered with successful formulations like this that fail to satisfy the fundamental need of anyone other than its creator. Surprisingly, that compelling moment that encourages action is not about the benefit that might arise from the solution being offered, but the resonance shared by those who find it intolerable that the need exists. When people interact at that intersection a loyal audience begins its formulation and within the bounded self-organization of that constituency the development of a new and successful movement emerges.