Cultural Entrepreneurship and the Banff Television Festival

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Abstract. Cultural entrepreneurship involves a conception, an initial launch, and a transition to an established event. Each stage generates "wicked" coordination and financial challenges. We explore this important process by examining the history of the Banff Television Festival, an annual event featuring a competition, workshops, and providing a forum for developing projects. The documentation indicates that the anticipated problems of nonprofit activities – inefficient administration, crude management systems, slow adaptation and little innovation – were not characteristic of the Banff experience. Well informed industry "customers" and patrons have established an environment which generally encouraged managerial competence and creativity. This benign result may not generalize to other cultural initiatives, in particular to those that serve the public directly and draw patronage from diverse sources.

Key words: culture, entrepreneurship, nonprofit, organization, incentives, management

1. Introduction

Entrepreneurs conceive and realize new ways of creating value. Researchers have usually focussed attention on individual entrepreneurship in a market setting. In contrast, we are interested in nonprofit team entrepreneurship that provides a cultural service with high value but, because of transaction costs, low revenue potential. The organizers of such services can appropriate some of the surplus created by charging fees, but this revenue is insufficient to cover costs. The remaining finance must come from private and public patronage.

Examples of nonprofit cultural entrepreneurship vary from well known international events – a World's fair, a travelling collection of Impressionist paintings, or the Cannes film festival – to similar, but less widely known, national, regional or local events celebrating visual art, theatre, music, and dance. The event may be a “one off” show, like a district centennial, or a repeated activity like the Shaw Festival, a program of theatre held annually in Niagara-on-the-Lake, a small town in Ontario, Canada.

The customers, who directly consume the services or indirectly derive benefits from the presentation, may be numerous, a select group, or a mix of the two. The proportion of costs that can be extracted from those who benefit through fees and

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donations varies significantly among different cultural initiatives. The information of patrons and their costs of monitoring the managers of the service also varies from service to service. Team entrepreneurship faces a number of challenges: perceiving a valuable new service, developing a plan, financing the launch, transforming a successful beginning into a viable series of derivative events, raising sufficient funds from “customers” and patrons to finance an ongoing series, creating an appropriate reward structure for the team, and developing an organization to administer and manage an established event.¹

We document how these challenges were met by those who conceived and developed the Banff Television Festival. Our information is derived from discussions with many of the initial and current participants, representatives of user groups and donors, and newspaper and magazine accounts.² This empirical exercise has both subjective and objective elements. Our approach is influenced by the “thick” analysis of anthropology (Geertz, 1973), business school case studies, and business historical studies (Chandler, 1962, 1977). It differs from these other methodologies in relying on economics to identify issues and categories.³

2. The Banff Television Festival: The Launch and Transition

2.1. The Team, the Concept and the Launch

In 1978, the city of Edmonton hosted the Commonwealth Games. A reported 10,000 local volunteers participated in its organization and administration. As an adjunct to the athletic events, the organizers supported a proposal to run a festival of films from the almost 50 participating countries. The International Feature Film Festival was conceived and organized by Fil Fraser, a Canadian film producer. Gerry Ezekiel,⁴ who was then an employee of the Alberta Department of Culture and had a research interest in the social impact of film and television, was on the steering committee of the games that approved the film festival. The committee appointed him to select the films that would be featured in the film festival.

The film festival was planned as a one-off event, but when it was well received, Fraser, Jean Lefebvre of the Festival Office of the Canadian Film Development Agency, David Leighton, the Director of the Banff Centre of Fine Arts, and other friends discussed launching a festival of films made for TV to be held annually at Banff. At the same time Serge Lozigue, who had a mission to start a film festival in Canada, visited Alberta and proposed to Horst Schmid, the Minister of Culture of Alberta, the possibility of a film festival at Banff. Schmid had worked with Fraser in staging both the Alberta Film Festival in 1974 and the festival associated with the games. Over a working lunch with Fraser, Schmid agreed to back a proposal for a television oriented festival at Banff organized by Fraser and Leighton. On a serviette, the Minister and Fraser worked out how funding could be stitched together to finance the project. Leighton asked Carrie Hunter, one of the founders of Head Hunter Films, to become the Festival Coordinator. Fraser, Leighton, Hunter