

This article by Jane Logan of Logan Strategy Inc. was first published in The Canadian Association in September 2004.

Motivating Your Board

The Media Awareness Network, or MNet, is a shining example of an organization that maximizes its Board. When its founding Co-director, Jan D'Arcy, left in June after a spectacular 10 years, it seemed like a great time to ask about the magic.

From a pioneering start in the early 90s, MNet now hosts the world's largest English-and French-language media education resource at www.media-awareness.ca . About 100,000 unique visitors come to the MNet site weekly, and well over 90% of them make return visits. The organization and its programs have become models for other countries.

And that's without core funding from government.

Over the years, a who's who of the broadcasting, cable and telco industries has served on MNet's Board, contributing to this success. Other alumni include the presidents of the Canadian Teachers' Federation, Canadian Association of Principals, Canadian Library Association, and senior health and government officials.

Jan shared her secrets for getting Board members engaged, contributing their time, brainpower and funds. Here is her thoughtful advice.

Mission, vision and partnerships:

- **Build commitment with a strong mission:** “Your mission should appeal to a higher good and be well understood. Board members have to know: it's bigger than my company, bigger than my sector, it's for our kids and their future. They need to understand that the organization they serve is doing an important job, doing it well, and no one else is doing it. As Board members, the leadership role of the organization becomes their own.”
- **Provide a common goal with a focussed vision that everyone understands:** “We said from day one we would develop a world-class on-line program *and* a world-class organization.”
- **Use the Board as a bridge to partnerships that can help a small organization accomplish the extraordinary:** “MNet's partnership model



ensures its programs are relevant, delivered efficiently in the marketplace, and linked to public policy. Major programs like those with the Canadian Library Association, Canadian Teachers' Federation, Canadian Paediatric Society, Girl Guides of Canada and others sponsored by corporate partners like Bell Canada are anchored by partner representatives on the Board and steering committees. Testimonials and enthusiasm have become part of Board discussion.”

Governance:

- **Conduct strategic planning or visioning sessions with the Board every three or four years:** “These sessions keep the organization on top of its game and in a leadership position. Our environment is constantly changing and good strategic planning helps an organization maximize new opportunities.”
- **Establish a by-law review every four or five years:** “This is key for ensuring continuity and refreshing the corporate memory.”
- **Select Board members based on clear criteria:** “MNet’s by-laws define expectations for balanced representation from different sectors. Develop a grid to understand what strengths are currently on the Board and what gaps need to be addressed.”
- **Plan, follow through and report:** “This may be obvious, but you have to do what you say you are going to do and then provide an annual report card. That provides Board satisfaction.”

Board mechanics:

- **Provide Board orientation:** “We have introductory sessions for new Board members to make sure they understand our purpose and founding story. Expectations are set, including the need to leave corporate interests at the door. ”
- **Ensure continuity:** “We invite outgoing Board members to sit in on our first meeting of the new Board. They help set the tone and new members observe their commitment.”
- **Make Board meetings interesting and informative:** “Our Board members say they come for the conversations. We show what the organization does, our progress in the past six months, and provide pre-



release briefings on research and new programs. The result is they really understand our work and our impact.”

- **Build strategic third-party encounters into Board meetings:** “At the end of our meetings, we often have a guest (for example a senior government official) to meet informally with Board members and senior staff. Once a year we have a VIP reception. It’s great value-added for Board members.”

Communications:

- **Consult transparently and strategically:** “It’s essential to be straightforward. When I have a tricky issue, I call three or four Board members for their advice *and* I tell them who else I am calling. We use their time wisely – these calls take about 10 minutes each. The result is getting excellent advice from the right people.”
- **Share the credit:** Jan credits her fellow founding officers Al MacKay, Sandra MacDonald, Sheridan Scott and Anne Taylor, for the organization’s success – as well as every other Board member and Chair since day one. Board contributions through partnerships, financial support and strategic advice are well recognized.
- **Stay in touch:** MNet Board alumni remain important advocates and receive regular updates about the organization’s work. “Once you are touched by us, you’ll discover our arms are pretty long.”

“Is that helpful?” Jan asked. “It seems like common sense to me.”

With a powerful and compelling mission and vision, a commitment to the next generation and to quality, MNet has attracted top notch Board members that have helped to push the organization to new heights. An equally committed staff, hard work, integrity and common sense deliver on this promise.

Jan D’Arcy has been instrumental in creating this culture of dedication. On a personal level, she has kept herself fresh and motivated with job changes every 10 years and is now looking for her next challenge.

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