

Case Study: Asheville Community Values Assessment

Think Globally, Act Locally
February 2012

Sector:

Community

Country:

USA

INTRODUCTION

This case study documents the process and learning that emerged when staff at the Barrett Values Centre (BVC) designed and conducted a Community Values Assessment in Asheville, North Carolina, USA, as a form of community service.

BACKGROUND

Having supported more than 15 National Values Assessments but only a handful of Community Assessments, staff at BVC felt that it would be important to:

- a) Explore for ourselves the challenges involved in carrying out Community Values Assessments;
- b) Learn how to maximize the impact and benefits of the assessment for the local community; and
- c) Share with the BVC network what we learned and discovered.

We also wanted to:

- a) Develop a new Community Values Assessment product; and
- b) Support staff at BVC headquarters in their own learning journey

THE SITUATION

We at the Barrett Values Centre recognise that the grassroots-style of leadership and engagement one finds within communities is fundamentally different from that which is experienced within organisations or nations.

As such, product development in this area would require a better understanding of the opportunities and challenges inherent in working at the local level.

THE PROCESS

The initial Community Values Assessment Project Team, consisting of Barrett Values Centre's Asheville-based staff developed a planning document that outlined the following:

- Mission, vision, values, and strategy for the project
- Project concept and goals
- Projected relevance and benefits to stakeholders:
 - Citizens
 - Community leaders and connectors
 - Asheville-based staff
 - Local CTT consultants
 - The CTT Network
 - Barrett Values Centre
- Proposed timeline:
 - Research
 - Planning
 - Messaging
 - Engagement
 - Post-survey event(s)
 - Gathering of resources
 - Documentation of the process

One of the Project Team's first decisions was to select a mode for engaging participation in the survey. Whilst hiring a professional data collection agency would have garnered a result with statistical validity, it was determined that direct community contact would foster the connections and conversations that were vital to achieving the aims of the work.

Having little brand recognition in the local community and a small staff presented a challenge in getting the message out. We decided this was an opportunity to build local, external relationships with Asheville-based CTT consultants and local community leaders who shared our values and vision for the project.

Key Learning: When choosing partners, consider how your resources, skills, assets, culture, and values complement one another. For instance, if external funding is required, a partner with non-profit status may enable tax deductions for sponsorships. See the following resource:

<http://www.businesslink.gov.uk/bdotg/action/layer?topicId=1073864682>.

Inward Preparations

In a series of bi-weekly meetings, the Project Team clarified the plans and purpose by defining the project scope and developing a shared mission and vision. We also developed an engaging title for the project that would serve our purpose and identity. Here is what we came up with:

- **External Vision:** To inform and empower problem-solving, decision-making and sustainability through an understanding of our community values
- **External Mission:** To illuminate collective perceptions of the community through the lens of our shared values
- **Internal Vision:** To support more effective community partnerships and initiatives by enabling alignment with what is most important to the people we serve
- **Internal Mission:** To give back to our community, while also enhancing our ability to support communities around the world
- **Project Title:** We Are Asheville: Making Asheville-Buncombe County Values Visible

Having established a mission and vision, the Project Team got to work on constructing the values template, the survey languages, the survey questions, and the survey demographics. The team also established the sample size and survey timing by researching population and demographic census figures for the city and county, as well as event schedules for the community.

Starting with the standard National Values template as a base, we took the time to explore the meaning and relevance for each value within the community context. New values were added to the template to describe the unique dynamics of a community.

We made the survey available in English and Spanish, on-line and in print format. Survey questions were reviewed to ensure that they were understandable to the public. Demographic categories were selected to address varying interests and initiatives of community leaders.

The following demographic categories were chosen. For each question, the option “prefer not to answer” was included to demonstrate respect for people’s privacy:

- Main geographic areas (8 selections)
- Geographical towns and neighbourhoods (90 selections)
- U.S. Postal Service zip codes (14 selections)
- Length of residence (9 selections)
- Age (11 selections)
- Gender (3 selections)
- Ethnicity (8 selections)
- Work sector (35 selections)
- Education level (10 selections)
- Income level (10 selections)
- Political affiliation (7 selections)

External Engagement

To leverage public participation, we engaged a broad spectrum of leaders and allies, as well as buzz-makers (grassroots leaders who help shape public dialogue through word-of-mouth), connectors (people with wide networks that could provide trusted introductions across boundaries), and media.

The Project Team identified a group of around 100 such individuals who were seen to have influence in different community niches. We connected with these people through conversations and/or standardized email describing the assessment, inviting their participation, and requesting their help in garnering participation.

From this group, we selected around 30 people to invite to a round table discussion. This core connector group was made up of existing champions of values work and/or leaders in key areas of sustainable community, as prescribed in a locally sourced community connector map. The invitation was well received, and connectors responded positively to efforts to reach out to them personally.

Representatives from health and wellbeing; religion; technology; transportation; jobs, products and services; arts and communication; education and learning; and regional economic development came together in August. The program invited participants to learn about the assessment, to discuss potential benefits and opportunities for them and the community, to develop new leads for further engagement and application of the results, and to commit in spreading the word to friends, colleagues and constituents asking for participation in the survey.

A media list was created to utilise both new and traditional means of communicating directly to the public, for more broad-range citizen engagement. Press releases were sent to

print media, TV, radio, and bloggers, and a local radio interview took place.

Our low cost marketing strategy included a website: www.WeAreAsheville.com, a Facebook page, links on local blogs, a radio interview, and a video on YouTube <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8I-de5qLMS0>. The video, which was created and promoted by local social media experts, garnered more than 3,000 hits. The video is now available in an editable format for members of the CTT Network to adapt and use in support of their own Community Values Assessments.

Key Learning: We determined that it was important not to rely on our own preconceived notions about what the community needed. In individual conversations with leaders and connectors, we began by asking them to express their needs and views so that we might better understand how the assessment might support their existing work. This validated the importance of what they were doing already, allowed us to explain how the assessment might help support them and address their issues, and alleviated concerns around this being "just another" project, initiative or set of data. This approach also helped to establish trust, as we were not seen to be primarily focused on promoting a BVC agenda.

OUTCOMES

By September of 2011, a total of 571 participants had taken the survey. Our goal of reaching 400 people was exceeded.

A debriefing was held with the Project Team to identify key stories coming from the overall results and to identify highlights in the demographic slices for a presentation to the public.

The overall [results](#) revealed that the Asheville-Buncombe community is focused on their quality of life, with an atmosphere that encourages new ways of thinking and support for local business owners. The community sees itself welcoming people from all walks of life, while working to ensure the well-being of residents and the environment alike.

The results also revealed that the people of Asheville are focused on improving their own lives while coming together to help their neighbours. The Desired Culture values showed that they want to focus on planning for a sustainable future. There is a call to promote collaborative efforts, to build economic strength and to provide educational opportunities for themselves and their children.

For Asheville-Buncombe, the cultural entropy* of 15% was relatively low, and far below the U.S. National entropy of 56%. When potentially limiting values were subtracted from the U.S. results, many similarities emerged between the top Current Culture values of Asheville and those of the U.S., even with the differences in values templates.

* Cultural entropy refers to the degree of dysfunction in a social system.

* Values alignment is based upon the number of matches across the top Personal, Current and Desired Culture values lists.

* Full spectrum indicates a high level of awareness and resiliency to meet changing life needs.

Demographic results were analysed based on values alignment* and cultural entropy. Values were tracked across demographics to determine similarities and differences of views. Work sector demographic slices were combined to offer high level views into the Healthcare industry, Culture and Tourism, Education, and Government.

Approximately 30 out of 50 key demographic groups requested a near-full spectrum* Desired Culture, with top values appearing in six of the seven Levels of Consciousness. This suggested that despite people having different backgrounds and socio-economic profiles, the participants had a shared understanding of the elements necessary to create resilience and success for the future of Asheville.

Challenge: The amount of data was almost overwhelming and presented a challenge when determining what stories to highlight in a public forum. Also, concerns were raised around the sample size of certain demographics, and whether a 10% margin of error might invalidate results in the eyes of leaders and the under-represented demographic groups.

Solution: When comparing the under-represented demographic groups' results with the overall results, we saw little variance, so we decided to stay focused on the overall results within the public presentation. Demographic views are made available upon request, and at such time any discrepancies will be explained and contextualised.

At the time that analysis began, the Project Team experienced a major shift in membership. Two active team members, who were also Barrett Values Centre employees, exited the local team. Four new CTT consultants joined the team, along with a former city council member and representatives of the local public radio station.

With new Project Team-membership came new ideas and views regarding the presentation and use of the data, and a much deeper dialogue emerged around these topics, along with questions on how to promote action for change. Aspirations emerged for utilising the assessment as a pilot for a Regional Values Assessment, with potential links to a major regional sustainability initiative.

Key Learning: When working with volunteers, be understanding and thankful for the time that they can give, and note that players may rotate or change to meet specific needs at different stages of the process. This may however affect team dynamics and timelines as roles shift, people get up to speed and bring fresh perspectives.

NEXT STEPS

The Asheville-Buncombe Community Values Assessment is still a work in progress as assessment team members finalise the results presentation (scheduled for early March) and reconnect with our leader, connector and media groups to invite participation in the program.

Currently, the local Chamber of Commerce has requested a presentation regarding alignment between their five-year economic development strategy and the community's values. The local public radio station is seeking to utilise values assessments for internal transformation work and external community engagement, and our social networking support is developing a video of photo-montage and stories to help bring the results to life.

A product development team within Barrett Values Centre will evaluate the Community Assessment process and tools to determine what resources and improvements might be made available to support members of the CTT Network in conducting community-based work.

Thanks and credit to the Barrett Values Centre Team, Asheville-Buncombe assessment team members and values advocates who have contributed their support.

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