**AAUW**

**Falls Church Area Branch**

**VISIONING PROJECT SUMMARY**

**March 2014**

Our Falls Church Area Branch was recommended for participation in a leadership development pilot project by Caroline Pickins, AAUW-VA President. The AAUW Member Leadership Programs Department is planning to launch a nationwide program that supports branches in reaching their full potential. Before the official launch, the department is piloting various components of the program to learn what works best.

In October 2013, the Board heard a presentation from Stephanie Kraemer, Program Manager, and Deepti Gudipati, Director, AAUW Member Leadership Programs Department; and Denise Decker, member of the working group established to support the leadership pilot program. The Board voted to participate in the project by engaging in a deliberative process of defining the focus or vision of our branch and determining action steps to achieve our vision. Deepti, Stephanie and Denise facilitated workshops using an interactive and collaborative format.

**November 11, 2013 Workshop 1: Identifying Our Branch Focus or Vision**

Members identified a focus statement that stated what the Branch cares most about and what the Branch does to achieve its mission: 1) raise money for scholarships (through the book sale; 2) create and maintain social bonds among members; 3) provide educational events for the Branch and the community; and (4) participate in Lobby Corps.

Suggestions of ways we could maximize our potential included: mentoring and service learning; advertising and communication; and better follow-up with recipients of scholarships. Potential barriers in thinking about a future vision identified were: 1) would the book sale still have appeal in 5 years; 2) meeting the competition; 3) burn-out; 4) aging of members; and 5) complexity of women’s lives.

**January 12, 2014 Workshop 2: Goals to Achieve our Vision**

The group defined and discussed three major goals for the branch.

**INCREASE VISIBILITY** in the Community. Currently, the Branch’s most visible activity is the Book Sale. The group thought that the Branch was marketing the Book Sale well. Viable alternatives to the over-the-street banners were identified: lobbying Falls Church delegates, involving high school students in promoting the sale, advertise to local book clubs. Another strategy is to employ social media: MeetUp, Facebook and the others.

**INCREASE REVENUE.** The amounts we give are relatively small in term of covering the costs of a college education. We would like to raise more money in order to either increase the amount for each scholarship or give a greater number of scholarships. It was suggested that we try to find corporate matching grants, e.g., the Verizon Foundation for Reading. It was also suggested that we invite local businesses to help, e.g., give a certain percentage of a day’s profits to the Scholarship Fund. It was also suggested that we could ask businesses to lend us their employees as volunteers for the numerous tasks involved in a successful sale.

**CREATE BONDS BETWEEN RECIPIENTS AND BRANCH.** It was suggested that we do better follow-up regarding our past recipients. It was suggested that we invite them to speak at meetings other than the May meeting. It was suggested that we post their pictures at the entrance to the Book Sale, or show a video of them explaining how the scholarship helped them. We could also set up a Skype connection. The purpose would be to help bring in a more diverse membership. One of the goals of the Book Sale is to recruit more members. Past recipients of scholarships could bring new energy to the Branch.

**February 9, 2014 Workshop 3: Marketing Our Branch**

The results of the second workshop indicated that the book sale is a well planned and executed event, and that opportunity lies more in leveraging the book sale and other public facing events in order to increase membership and awareness of our goals with the general public. Therefore, the focus of this workshop was how to market our branch, and not just an event, but the whole of what we do and who we are. Deepti and Denise presented best practices and tips to improve our marketing.

Marketing was defined as telling people who you are, what you do, why they should care about what you do, and (most importantly) what you want them to do with that information.

Our “brand identity” was defined as what people think of us, not what we think of ourselves! We need to develop a strong brand so that others don’t do the branding for us. The key to effective branding is: Make sure you are in control of their perception; make sure that what others perceive is the brand you aim to portray.

Once we have examined and settled on our branch brand, we need to start thinking about communicating our branch *out to the world.* This is the process known broadly as messaging. Messaging is critical to telling people about our branch. Messaging is what gives our branch *visibility—*which is a very important, powerful thing*.*

**Calendar/Schedule of Branch Events**

When we gear up to design our next schedule of branch programs and events, we should pull out these questions and put our schedule to the marketing/messaging test.

* Does our schedule of programs accurately communicate our branch brand? Is this the persona we want to communicate?
* What audience is our program schedule likely to attract? Is this the target audience we want to attract?
* Could we adapt our program schedule to appeal to a wider demographic (and hence, find new potential members.)

**Messaging through Print Materials**

In addition to our branch’s program schedules, we also communicate our branch brand through various print channels: posters, brochures, newsletters, for example.

We could do one big, successful book sale a year, the proceeds of which fund three local scholarships to send young women to NCCWSL. But if the only thing the community hears about is our branch collecting books for the sale, or information about the day of the book sale, then all they know is that you are an organization (with an unknown mission and purpose) that holds a book sale.

How can we change this perception?

What do you think of this poster? “Drop your books here for AAUW’s 35th annual book sale on April 10th”

What’s wrong here?

Think back to the initial definition of marketing: the “why” is totally missing! Also, the branch brand (or personality) isn’t coming through, there’s no “hook,” the photo is uninteresting. By telling them **WHY** you are raising funds in this manner, you improve your messaging and more effectively communicates your branch brand.

How about this instead? Create the leaders of tomorrow. Drop your books here and help AAUW send 3 local girls to the premiere college women’s leadership conference in the country! The WHY is very clear. Now the community knows the branch has a book sale and that it funds leadership training for college women. Good hook, better picture. Your branch brand is more clearly communicated through this good messaging.

Here are 4 guiding principles for messaging (remember these guiding principles apply to posters like the one we just used as an example, but they also apply to *all other marketing channels*: newsletters, websites, brochures, etc):

1. Grab their attention *first*

Facts are very important but only after you have someone’s attention.

*2.* Focus on what *they* need and want.

* Who is your target audience? (If you have more than one, is the same poster appropriate for all of them?)
* Put yourself in their shoes: what questions do *they* want answered?
* Make sure your message tells them what they WANT and NEED to know

3. Your branch brand should be well-represented in your messaging.

* Does your brand shine through your message?
* Does your message help you communicate “who” your branch is? Assume they don’t know and/or have the wrong impression.

4. Images are powerful. Make them count.

* Real people doing real things (scrap the clip art!)
* Not generic photos that could be from any old event (women posing as a group in non-descript places)
* Action shots are great.
* Think: what type of image will inspire action?

**Your Branch Website**

One very powerful way companies and organizations communicate their brand to the outside world is through their website. Your website is perhaps the most powerful way to gain visibility for your branch. Your website may be the first, and only, impression a potential member receives of your organization. Your website tells your story when you’re not around to tell it.

If you are effectively marketing your branch, then a large number of people are going to see AAUW Falls Church’s name throughout the community. They may not have the opportunity to speak with you about AAUW Falls Church, but we hope they will be motivated to Google you. Your website is going to tell your AAUW story.

First, you better have one, and second, it had better be good or you will lose their interest. Not only will you lose their interest, but, if someone mentions AAUW Falls Church in their hearing, they’ll tell that person exactly how you lost their interest.

The AAUW Site Resources team will develop a website for your branch at no cost whatsoever. And, for a very reasonable annual fee, you can also have the team manage your content so your site is always up to date.

Think about your branch website. Ask yourself these questions:

1) Enticing? Does it immediately and succinctly tell people who you are and what you do?

2) Is it up to date? Or, are the dates listed as future meetings two years old? (Don’t laugh, that’s a true story!)

3) Appealing to diverse target audiences? Parts of your site should very well be meant for current members (inward-focusing). Other parts should be meant for potential members! Be clear on which is which: help different groups of people find what they are looking for easily.

4) Easily navigable? Can you find pertinent info easily? And by “pertinent” we mean what you do and how to join.

5) Is it visually appealing? Are there engaging photos or tons of text you don’t have time to read?

In order to frame your thinking about writing for your webpage, try this: think of your webpage as if it were a floor plan of a hospital.

When you enter the hospital, you find yourself in the lobby. What’s the purpose of the hospital lobby? What’s it meant to do for you, the visitor?

* + Sets the tone, makes your comfortable. Spiffier. Directory.

Now, what are you doing once you beyond the lobby and to someone’s hospital room who you are visiting?

* + You’ve stopped moving and searching for your destination. You’re hanging out for a while!

Think about your website’s homepage as a lobby and its landing pages as rooms.

We want our homepages to serve very similar functions that lobbies do: introduce and direct. And, we want our landing pages to allow people to hang out, dive in, stick around, get comfortable.

When we write for our homepages, we focus on brevity. People are scanning here, so you need clear and catchy headlines that help them find what they need and get going to their next destination. When we write for our landing pages, we go deeper. People have found the content they are looking for and they are sticking around and *reading.* Make sure you know what you are writing for—a lobby or a room. It should be clear if the reader is to move quickly or stick around and read.

3. Is your content reader-focused or organization-focused?

We want our content to be reader focused, not organization-focused. So, what does reader-focused content look like and do for the user:

* Anticipates and answers their questions Identifies with the reader and what they want/need (their struggles, dreams)
* Non-technical or organization-specific language
* Use pronoun “you”
* Content is form of service (help reader do what need to do, find information they are looking for)

Organization-focused:

* Aims to show off the organization and its activities
* Designed based on what organization wants to communicate
* Riddled with organization-specific, internal language
* Hard to find information that is pertinent to the reader

The following information was not presented at the workshop, but is included here using printed information from Deepti:

Perhaps after listening to this module, you are beginning to form a vision in your head of the your branch in its ideal “marketed” state. Let’s explore that vision a bit. Given what you’ve learned today, visualize your branch as well-marketed as it could possibly be.

* What marketing channels do you use? (website? Radio? Posters? Word of mouth)
* What audiences do you target?
* What do your marketing materials look like?
* What is the result of your marketing efforts? What impact do you see?

You can make this vision a reality! The last step is to think about some concrete steps to take to get you closer to this dream.