

7 Questions Communities Should Consider

As 2009 Approaches

By

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With three months remaining in 2008, it is imperative that leaders of communities large and small across the globe start planning for 2009 and beyond. One of the key ingredients for leaders to plan successfully in today's hyper-competitive and dynamic global economy is harnessing their ability to think differently. In their 2006 publication *Revolutionary Wealth*, Alvin and Heidi Toffler recognized this need when they wrote that "To deal with today...we need not only new knowledge but new ways to think about it." This article provides a series of questions that provide community leaders, economic development officials and other key stakeholders with new ways to think about sustainable economic development.

Traditionally, communities recruit big-chain retailers, attract young creative professionals or foster technology based development. While debates rage on as to the effectiveness of these strategies, there can be no debate about how the world has changed during the last five years. With the advent of innovative technological advancements, the rapid increase in the amount of information available with each passing day and the speed in which information is exchanged, the world in 2008 is very different from just a few short years ago. Thus, to complement traditional development strategies and to address the impact of recent advancements, leaders, officials and stakeholders should think differently and consider addressing seven questions as there is a tremendous need to help residents and businesses meet the demands and challenges of today's dynamic and ever changing global economy.

Question #1: How can you better serve your business community in order to help it grow in today's hyper-competitive economy?

Traditional Answer: Communities will sometimes provide a local business directory or publication of some type.

Answer via Thinking Differently: **Empower** business owners with training required to differentiate in order to compete more effectively in the new sales and marketing environment.

Explanation: Communities need to do more than just provide a directory of businesses. Instead, leaders and officials should consider implementing an educational component that will empower business owners with the training required to understand just how important it is to differentiate and implement a cohesive and impactful sales and marketing strategy. As Allen P. Adamson said in *Brand Simple: How the Best Brands Keep it Simple and Succeed*, having an easy to understand and relevant message has always been critical but "...it's even more critical today given the extraordinary proliferation of products and service worldwide." In 2009 and beyond, leaders, officials and stakeholders would serve their business owners and managers well if they empowered them with the knowledge and ability required to compete in an ever increasing hyper-competitive global economy.

Question #2: How can your community's population create a stronger social fabric?

Traditional Answer: Communities hold festivals, carnivals and other types of events designed to generate a stronger social fabric.

Answer via Thinking Differently: **Motivate** your residents to get engaged in activities both online and offline.

Explanation: Leaders, officials and stakeholders should capitalize on the rapid expansion of on-line communities that has taken place during the last five years. Communities should build sophisticated web platforms that allow their residents to get engaged online so that such activity complements off line events. As Peter Block writes in *Community: The Structure of Belonging*, "...the form in which citizens are involved needs to change from a patriarchal, consumer model to a partnership model that takes advantage of the energizing power of the small group." Motivating residents to get engaged in activities both online and offline can help maximize the power of the small group.

Question #3: What can your community's residents do to better communicate and collaborate?

Traditional Answer: Communities hold public hearings and place ads in newspapers and some may even use an email newsletter.

Answer via Thinking Differently: **P**romote Web 2.0 tools and functionality for all residents, businesses and organizations.

Explanation: Communication and collaboration is now easier than ever before thanks to the advent of innovative web based platforms that are usually free to use. Additionally, with the uptake in high speed technology and wireless communications, residents also have faster and better access to the Internet. As Don Tapscott and Anthony D. Williams observed in *Wikinomics: How Mass Collaboration Changes Everything*, "...winning societies will be those that tap the torrent of human knowledge and translate it into new and useful applications." Leaders, officials and stakeholders who want to sustain development in 2009 and beyond should determine how to incorporate web 2.0 tools into their daily routines so that their residents can better communicate and collaborate.

Question #4: How can more young citizens get engaged in designing your community's future?

Traditional Answer: Communities traditionally under utilize students in the community development process.

Answer via Thinking Differently: **O**rchestrate student involvement in revitalization and economic development

Explanation: Leaders, officials and stakeholders need to think differently and reach out to students at all levels and get them engaged in designing the future of their community. Students are already involved in what Jeff Howe, author of *Crowdsourcing: Why the Power of the Crowd Is Driving the Future of Business*, coined "creative collaboration" where they create content with one another and then share it online. Today's middle school and high school students "can concentrate on multiple projects simultaneously and they collaborate seamlessly and spontaneously with people they've never met." If given the chance, students could illustrate how the community could benefit from their collaboration efforts.

Question #5: What can your community's young professionals do to enhance their careers?

Traditional Answer: Communities hold networking/social events such as happy hour for young professionals.

Answer via Thinking Differently: **W**ork with young professionals to better understand the success mindset.

Explanation: Young professionals need guidance and support on what it means to be successful. As Jean M. Twenge concluded in *Generation Me: Why Today's Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled--and More Miserable Than Ever Before*, "Young people are starving for good advice on career paths...as more young people will find it difficult to navigate the transition from college to first job, or find themselves dissatisfied with their first job (or second, or third)." Leaders, officials and stakeholders would better serve their young professionals by providing dynamic and motivational seminars and events highlighting what it takes to be successful in today's ever changing global economy.

Question #6: How can your community workforce continue to grow its skill level?

Traditional Answer: Communities might offer a workforce development plan that focuses on job readiness.

Answer via Thinking Differently: **E**ducate workforce on the value and utility of thinking like an entrepreneur and teaching them everyday leadership skills.

Explanation: Instead of the typical work skills, workers need to be trained how to think creatively and in a much more dynamic fashion than currently taught. As The Conference Board reported in its 2005 report "Changing demographics combined with the changing needs of American business will create two substantial tests for employers: finding ways to attract, retain and motivate high quality employees regardless of age, ethnicity, gender or occupation; and developing workforce management practices that balance the corporate bottom line with the needs and expectations of a diverse, global workforce." Leaders, officials and stakeholders should consider implementing an educational component of on-line tools as well as seminars on the value of thinking creatively and entrepreneurially in order to solve everyday issues for all workers regardless of their position.

Question #7: How can your community better prepare to address future issues?

Traditional Answer: Communities periodically invite guests in to talk about special topics.

Answer via Thinking Differently: **Realize** creation of a community Empowerment Board.

Explanation: As Sandy Bauruch, head of the Economic Development Administration, stated in 2007 article *The Five New Realities of Economic Development*: “The ability to innovate is the only possible sustainable competitive advantage.” In order for communities to innovate leaders, officials and stakeholders should consider implementing an Empowerment Board. This new and practical Empowerment Board would help prepare the community for the future, keep residents and businesses up to date and complement the efforts of leaders and officials who are addressing today’s concerns.

Conclusion

The old adage: “If all you ever do is all you’ve ever done, then all you ever get is all you’ve ever got” certainly applies here as leaders, officials and stakeholders prepare their community for the challenges of tomorrow. As you plan for 2009 and beyond, consider these seven questions and realize that thinking differently and being innovative comes down to one word: EMPOWER:

- E**mpower businesses to differentiate
- M**otivate residents to get engaged
- P**romote Web 2.0 tools and capabilities
- O**rchestrate student involvement
- W**ork with young professionals
- E**ducate workforce
- R**ealize creation of Empowerment Board

Is it time for your community to EMPOWER its residents and businesses with the ability and knowledge to succeed in today’s ever changing and hyper-competitive global economy?

<u>Question</u>	<u>Action Step</u>
1. How can your business community grow in today's hyper-competitive economy?	E mpower your businesses to differentiate and better understand sales and marketing.
2. How can your community's population create a stronger social fabric?	M otivate your residents to get engaged in activities both online and offline.
3. What can your community's residents do to better communicate and collaborate?	P romote Web 2.0 tools and functionality for children and adults.
4. How can more young citizens get engaged in designing your community's future?	O rchestrate student involvement in revitalization and economic development
5. What can your community's young professionals do to enhance their careers?	W ork with young professionals to better understand the success mindset.
6. How can your community workforce continue to grow its skill level?	E ducate workforce on the value and utility of entrepreneurial and leadership skills.
7. How can your community continue to empower its residents and businesses?	R ealize creation of a community Empowerment Board.