

BY Kirsten Ferguson



STANDING OUT ABOVE THE CROWD

Fatty bacon, gossiping hummingbirds, well-mannered cows and bullwhip-cracking archeologists—all are topics you wouldn't expect to find in a membership email from a land trust. But each of these found their way into the creative and delightfully absurd emails sent out by Kathleen Ackley, associate director of Capitol Land Trust in Olympia, Washington. Ackley uses humor to grab her audience's attention and to stand out above the mass of organizational e-newsletters.

Ackley uses simple, low-tech email missives that lack graphics, attachments or fancy formatting—but are laugh-out-loud funny—to get the word out about her land trust's successes and its many events involving restoration work, bird walks, speaker series, kayak tours and conservation breakfasts (hence, the bacon joke).

It works. Members respond to say they're drawn to Capitol Land Trust not only for its important cause but also because of its "totally fun" emails.

"Considering all the correspondence you get, how much are you really going to read?" asks Ackley. "I try to make people laugh. Environmental news can be depressing. It's mainly the level of ridiculousness that I go to that entertains people. Sometimes I'll put in some strange reference that people will have to go Google—

and they do. I try to be creative to get them involved. There are only so many ways you can ask someone to come and pick weeds."

Not everyone can be as funny as Ackley, though, and any land trust wanting to try out humor would do well to test it first on staff or volunteers. Ackley's universal lesson is this: "Try to be yourself." She explains that it's good for members to get to know the people behind the organization so they can feel good about supporting them. "Show your own personality and don't be afraid to use humor. Let people know there's a person behind your emails. Be genuine and make the personal connection."

In New England, land trusts tend to be fairly small organizations, organized by town or municipality. As a

Opposite: This photo won an award in a contest jointly sponsored by the Lyme, Old Lyme, Salem, Essex and East Haddam land trusts (all in the lower Connecticut River Valley). The contest brings attention to protected places.

result, their hyper-local nature can be both a challenge and an opportunity, says Humphrey Tyler, who serves on the board of the Lyme Land Conservation Trust in Lyme, Connecticut, and also on the steering committee of the Connecticut Land Conservation Council.

On the one hand, being local “makes it easier to connect with people,” says Tyler. “You see them every day and it’s easy to be on a first-name basis with members, municipal officials and zoning boards. On the other hand, many small land trusts do not have the staff to execute an effective communications program, so it has to be done by volunteers.”

The Lyme Land Conservation Trust has overcome this challenge by actively recruiting volunteers and board members who have expertise in communications. “Find someone in the conservation community who has some background in media or public relations and recruit that person to help,” says Tyler.

Tyler himself is a former newspaper reporter, which gives him an edge when understanding how to deal with local media. His organization goes beyond just sending out press releases by finding ways to interact with local reporters on a more personal level.

The Lyme Land Conservation Trust is actively recruiting volunteers and board members with expertise in communications.

“With the media, it’s important to get to know them, understand their deadlines and what they’re interested in,” says Tyler. “Call them up and say, ‘I’d like to get together for coffee to find out what your needs are and how best to let you know what’s going on in our organization.’”

With most newspapers and reporters stretched very thin in today’s media market, organizations can also see results by submitting photographs and already-written articles to community newspapers. But it’s still important to find out what the newspaper’s standards are, advises Tyler. “That’s another good reason to have someone on your board with experience in media—who understands how to prepare and submit material so it ends up getting published.”

12 TIPS

for Connecting with Your Community

Kathleen Ackley of Capitol Land Trust, Humphrey Tyler of Lyme Land Conservation Trust and Jason Denhart and Kara Heide of Eagle Valley Land Trust provided the following tips for successful community engagement.

1. Remember communication is a two-way street: Be sure to listen to people in your community and find out their goals for conservation.
2. Start with a communications plan that lays out your goals and the different ways you will reach your target audience (i.e., the community served by your land trust).
3. Focus on one message at a time and coordinate it consistently across multiple media channels (newspapers, blogs, social media, direct mail, etc.).
4. Let members get to know the people behind your emails by having them come from a person rather than from an anonymous group voice.
5. Recruit conservation-minded people with marketing or media experience to your board.
6. Identify people like you who share your conservation values; start connecting with them and they will help you connect with their networks.
7. Save on workload by piggy-backing on existing events related to your cause.
8. Sit down with members of the press in your community to find out how you can help them learn about your work.
9. Put your marketing collateral on small flash drives and offer them for free to people who sign up for your newsletter at events.
10. Don’t be afraid to use humor and creativity in letters and emails in order to make the personal connection with supporters.
11. Invitations to fundraising events are harder to ignore when they are printed and delivered by mail.
12. Engage board members in their love for conservation by asking them to pen a column for the local newspaper.

In the heart of the Rocky Mountains of Colorado, the Eagle Valley Land Trust has had great success with engaging its small rural community through its own monthly “Trust Our Land” column in the local newspaper, *The Vail Daily*. “We sat down and looked at how most people in our community get their information and news,” explains Jason Denhart, director of communications and development.

Written by staff, volunteers, supporters and board members, the columns have covered topics like the land trust’s efforts to preserve the pristine Lake Creek Valley, home to an important elk population, and the connection between conserving local ranches and strengthening the local economy.

Eagle Valley Land Trust has seen its community engagement efforts pay off, tripling its volunteer base.

The editor of the newspaper insisted on seeing column topics mapped out in advance, so the land trust planned out a year’s worth of content—which turned out to be a very good thing. Once they had a calendar of messaging ideas, Eagle Valley Land Trust staff focused on coordinating those messages across their various communications channels—making sure their newspaper columns were amplified via related posts on their blog and social media sites like Facebook as well as through direct mail.

Eagle Valley Land Trust has seen its aggressive community engagement efforts pay off, tripling its volunteer base since it began the column and amped up its efforts to be more visible in the community by attending local events like fairs, farmers markets and rodeos, as well as meetings with local sportsmen, private outdoors clubs, business associations and tourism groups.

A New Publication *Just for You*

“One of the more successful things we did for our 2013 membership drive was to form a circle of giving—we call it the President’s Circle—and we got the idea from a Land Trust Alliance publication last year,” says George Moore, executive director of Lyme Land Conservation Trust in Lyme, Connecticut.

George is referring to *Field Guide*, the Alliance’s free quarterly newsletter designed for land trust board members, which debuted last summer. The Alliance seeks to support land trusts’ strong governance and ensure our collective sustainability. This publication’s topic calendar includes subjects that board members have indicated are important to them, such as fundraising and supervision.

The article “Join the Club: Starting a High-Dollar Giving Circle for Your Land Trust” inspired George to give the idea a try. He says, “The article in the newsletter was very helpful and gave us a lot of the detail and procedures to follow. It also gave me the facts to present to the board.” Describing their President’s Circle as a group of donors who give \$1,000 or more annually, he says they now have 35 people in the club. “Many are people who give from time to time when we have an acquisition but then drop it to a low ‘maintenance level’ of membership. This will keep them giving on a steady basis, allowing us a more consistent income flow.”

Other articles in *Field Guide* have included “The Polishing Touch: Board Members Boost Event Success” and “Board Building: Inviting People with a Shared Vision.”

“*Field Guide* gave us a very helpful idea and I’m glad we implemented it,” says George.

To sign up to receive *Field Guide*, visit www.lta.org/boardservices.

Such engagement was necessary, Executive Director Kara Heide explains, because many people in the community appreciated the majestic views and recreational opportunities of the iconic mountain landscapes, but didn’t fully understand the role of the land trust in protecting them. Once the land

trust started telling its story to the community, its fundraising took off. “We created an ‘aha!’ moment,” says Heide, “and once people made that connection, it exploded.”

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