

# Three Business Concepts You Can Apply to Community Engagement

By Brittany Ramos

Posted on the Living Cities Blog April 7, 2015

The [fourth week of our e-course on community engagement in collective impact](#) explores opportunities to apply business concepts to community engagement work. The reading materials and exercise for this week will complement [previous modules](#), by shifting focus from “why” you might engage with community members and continuing to explore “how” to implement strategies in a way that allows you to rapidly learn and adapt.

There may be many differences between the private sector and the social sector but the bottom line is that, in the private sector, there is a financial “bottom line.”

Some might assume that because businesses are fundamentally designed to make money, they operate apathetically and can’t offer much to social change organizations. However, the push to increase profits often drives innovation, continuous improvement, clarity of purpose and agility. Many of these qualities have been honed and developed over decades into established fields of practice in the business world. The growing interest in [“social enterprise,”](#) or business driven by social good, has highlighted opportunities for businesses to learn from the social sector. Likewise, social change organizations can benefit a great deal from the tools of the private sector. In fact, when you think of your collective impact initiative as a “startup,” and community members as “customers,” you might begin to notice that the largest difference, besides the mission, is language.

## 1. Engagement is Marketing

In business marketing, there is a practice of leveraging customer research and market analysis as an opportunity to build customer buy-in and engagement—even before the product or service is designed.

When you think about marketing, you might think of the work that goes into producing commercials, advertisements and product labels. However, by [taking a business approach and thinking about marketing as the general practice of understanding your customer and their needs](#), collective impact initiatives can foster a sense of community ownership of the work.

Whether in business or collective impact work, marketing is fundamentally about getting people to use your product or service. You can do that by raising awareness about it, offering incentives, educating, going for a hard sell, etc. But the best “marketing” starts before a product or service is designed. It starts with going to the customer and understanding their need. I started working in direct sales when I was eighteen years old and quickly built a strong client base and started training other agents. People always asked how my rate for closing sales was so high! It was simple: I showed up to the appointment, asked what the potential client needed and then gave it

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to them. I never tried to upsell or convince people they wanted or needed something that they didn't. Later when I was working as a Strategic Communications Officer in Afghanistan with the Army, I discovered message campaigns, alliance building, civilian engagement, etc. are about exactly the same thing: talking to people, understanding their needs, and then finding a way to address them.

In business, startups grapple with similar challenges that collective impact initiatives may face. For instance, startups often fall into the trap of building a flashy new product or service that no one wants. Then they fight an uphill battle trying to persuade customers to buy their product after heavy investment has already been sunk into the business. Much of the need for persuasive marketing could have been alleviated if customers were part of the design process early on. Too often, collective impact initiatives find themselves in a similar predicament: they try to persuade communities to buy into decisions made and priorities set without their input. Instead, collective impact initiatives can learn to let the “customer” articulate their needs and then work with customers to address them.

There is no shortage of need in social change work, and collective impact initiatives require almost constant marketing when you shift your thinking this way. You persuade people to join and stay in a cross-sector partnership, you raise awareness about your efforts, you convince people to fund you, and so much more. Community engagement is a fundamentally important part of collective impact work because it is about letting go of assumptions and going straight to the customer to find out what they need.

## 2. Build Lean and Iterate Fast

Strong businesses constantly iterate to improve their processes, products and services in order to survive. In today's fast paced consumer markets, gone are the days of drawn out product development and perfectionism. [The companies that learn and improve the fastest](#) are often the ones that come out on top. This need to be able to test and improve faster is, in part, why [Lean Startup Methodology](#) with its focus on building, measuring and learning has spread like wildfire throughout the business world.

Understandably, there is a great deal of confusion across the field about “the right way” to engage community members –probably because there isn't one! The complexities of place, race and poverty can make engagement efforts intimidating and bewildering. That initial fear and anxiety often results in avoidance of deep and authentic engagement altogether. And avoidance is likely the worst case scenario. In these cases, the Lean Startup's [Minimum Viable Product \(MVP\)](#) concept can come in handy.

An MVP can be defined as “that version of a new product which allows a team to collect the maximum amount of learning about customers with the least effort.” Here, “product” refers to whatever you are designing—a program, a service, a process—instead of a physical item.

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“Customer” refers to whomever is intended to benefit from and use the “product” you are designing. A great first step to applying Lean Startup methods is launching your product before you build it.

For example, let’s say that you have been hosting town hall meetings to get community input, but have had very poor turnout. You assume that poor turnout is a result of the time and resources it takes for community members to attend given the long hours they work. You hypothesize is that, if you build a digital interface for community participation and input, then community members will be more engaged and involved. To “launch before you build,” you would find a way to test your most crucial assumption as quickly as possible, with as few resources as possible. Even if building a dedicated platform for seamless engagement is the perfect strategy, why not test your assumption about what the problem is *before* sinking resources into an extensive project? You could use existing social media platforms or email surveys to discover whether or not community members will engage digitally. You can host meetings at different times first, or advertise to see if the problem is awareness instead of accessibility.

The important part is to test and learn quickly, so that you can iterate and scale up to a solution that will help you build the community buy-in you need to effectively tackle a big audacious goal together.

### 3. Infrastructure Must Support Change

Establishing a “new normal,” where the community is a default partner of social change work, requires that initiatives adjust systems that hinder community engagement and invest in new systems that encourage and support it.

In business, talent development, operations, product development, etc are usually internal functions. When large businesses move to shift the way they work, [the best ones build or adjust their infrastructure to support the changes](#) and ensure they are enduring. For example, when business wants to create a culture of transparency, they might create open desk space instead of closed cubicles, create a company message board for open communication, and add training about the skill of giving feedback to their onboarding process. Essentially, they adjust existing systems that hinder transparency and invest in new systems that encourage it.

In many cases, non-profit and public sector organizations also make these internal system changes well. And, while that is true, other sectors can still learn from the [tech companies that rocked the business world](#) by intentionally designing their processes to support collaboration and innovation. The challenge in applying that kind of intentional design process in communities is that talent pipelines, communication networks, transit, etc are often independent functions. In your initiative, it is helpful to ask: how do you build infrastructure, literal or figurative, to make

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sure that community engagement becomes part of the local culture rather than a temporary and transactional effort?

Engaging the community around a particular initiative or effort is good, but when a community is repeatedly approached for short term participation rather than as part of long term change, [mistrust and frustration tend to build](#) and make future engagement efforts even more difficult. Building and changing systems as you go is a critical part of ensuring that both the relationships you establish and the change you seek are enduring.

Community engagement can be challenging and figuring out *how* to do it can be the toughest part. The business world has plenty of tools and methods that can serve as practical guidance for collective impact initiatives if they can look past the [differences in terminology](#). [Collective impact principles are most powerful](#) when they serve to align the unique knowledge and best practices of the social, public and private sectors behind a shared result developed *with* communities.

Next week, we will release the fifth module of this e-course, which will focus on applying a racial equity and inclusion lens to community engagement in collective impact. If you haven't yet, register now to participate in the e-course.

To discuss community engagement in collective impact, join our Twitter “study hall” on April 10th at 1pm ET to ask your questions and share your insights. We will be joined by representatives from [Moves The Needle](#) to help spark and moderate the discussion. Use the hashtag [#CEinCI](#) to join in.

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