

A Passion for Renewal

Co-operation & commerce within prison walls

BY STACEY CORRIVEAU

Louise, a marketing specialist, begins with her usual introduction to the power of branding. She randomly sets out cans of colas on a side table in the classroom: a no-name variety plus a popular brand name. She invites her audience to help themselves to a drink.

Usually, folks head straight for the branded product. Louise's plan is to then invite the group's "associations" of what the brand name evokes as compared to the no-name: "superior," "consistent" on the one hand; "cheap," and "low quality" on the other.

But this is not your usual place or audience.

We're in a meeting room in a living unit in Mountain Institution, a medium-security prison in Agassiz, B.C., which houses over 500 male inmates. Her onlookers are federal offenders serving sentences of 15 years to life for a variety of serious crimes. They are also founding members of InsideArt, an art marketing co-operative, and I have invited Louise in to teach the group about the importance of branding.

It had taken me, the project co-ordinator, many calls and much paperwork to arrange this visit; Louise had to obtain security clearance in advance, pass through a metal detector, get wanded by a guard, and move through three security checkpoints to reach the members. An institutional lockdown could occur at any time, causing immediate evacuation of all visitors, and necessitating another visit with the same process, the same paperwork, and the same 2-hour drive round-trip.

... So what does this group do when presented with the table of refreshments? They choose whatever soda is closest. To them,

each and every drink is a "sweet brown carbonated beverage," indistinguishable from the other. Only one participant comments on the brand-name cola, saying "people are stupid to pay so much more when they can get the same thing cheaper." Louise is stunned.

What was intended as an introduction to the power of branding for the inmates turned into a re-introduction to the realities of isolation for the "outmates" – the non-incarcerated. Over the past three years, there have been many days like that.

A Co-op is Born

In 2002, as a business counsellor at Community Futures South Fraser in Abbotsford B.C., I began to explore the appetite for self-employment within the federal prison system. Correctional service is a booming industry in the Fraser Valley, yet inmates are people that the community would rather forget. I encountered at Mountain a group of men thirsty for knowledge and with a passion for artwork, particularly wood and glass.

I learned of the Co-operative Development Initiative (CDI), funding that supports the testing and demonstration of innovative uses of the co-operative model. I was intrigued. Corrections Canada allows inmates to pursue "hobbies." What about an inmate arts co-op, functioning within the bounds of the penitentiary system? Theoretically, inmates could build a business that they could take with them into the community upon release. They would be taxpayers, relying less on the social safety net not only after prison time, but perhaps even during it.

(photo) Says Mark Jarman, a lifer, "original art must not only be created with the hands and the mind, but also with the heart and the soul."

Late in 2003, CDI granted \$100,000 to Community Futures South Fraser over two years to develop an art marketing co-operative at Mountain Institution, with an eye to growth across the region and potential replication across the country and beyond. Under another contract with CORCAN (the vocational training arm of Correctional Service Canada or CSC), I was already providing a 13-session business basics course at Mountain.

The story of InsideArt is partly a series of compromises that its supporters have had to make in their expectations, perhaps even their principles, in order to keep it moving forward. I thought the first compromise would be one that CSC would make. Instead, I was first.

CSC's Commissioner's Directive, entitled "Inmate-Operated Business," allows inmates to operate businesses from prison. But when we received the CDI grant no standard operating practices, or Standing Order, existed to outline how this is to happen. Thus, whenever inmates requested permission to start businesses, they were rejected by the prisons' wardens because no operational standards were in place to do so.

Simple, I thought: I'll just write the Standing Order. In collaboration with the inmates, of course.

We completed the draft in March 2004 and, after vetting by Mountain staff, CSC submitted to National Headquarters. The co-op's development timeline assumed that the enabling procedures would be approved, and sure enough, National Headquarters approved them. Yet they remained unsanctioned at Mountain, the very institution for which we wrote them, and where business capacity is at its greatest.

This has remained the case, even though the co-op was incorporated late in 2004. Technically, InsideArt is a marketing club for hobby work. What am I enabling, hobbyists or businesspeople?

Confidence-Building vs Business Priorities

As Louise's experience with the colas shows, it was quite a job to turn historically excluded folk into decision-makers for a project whose fiscal success rested on the buying habits and consumer culture of people "on the street."

Due to CSC programs, prisoners are some of the most "self-actualized" people you would ever meet. They are in touch with their feelings and know how to express themselves. But they are lacking in hard skills for transition into the community. Long-term inmates have never seen the internet. The thought of using ATMs terrifies them. Their apparent lack of proficiency will be an immediate flag to people on the street that they have spent an extended time "away," in prison.

I was challenged by this. Exactly what should I encourage, and how? CED practitioners are used to punched-up messaging. It shines bright in our communication toolbox when building proposals for project funding, when reporting results, and when presenting our projects to the public.

For example, if the inmates' artwork was a bit (or quite a bit) outdated in design, it was near perfection technically. The wood finishes felt butter-smooth to the touch; the men used innovative glass techniques with ease. Yet the low pricing on their artwork was only just covering costs. "You are artists!" I railed at them, "Charge more! You can compete on the open market!"

So they cast off the Corrections tag "hobbyist" with disdain. They were artists, businesspeople.

Enter Sid Gould, glass artist. Sid delivered a pill that was mighty hard to swallow. "Yes, you are artists and live to create the \$8,000 one-of-a-kind pieces. But it's the production pieces that will be your bread and butter. Selling many \$20 items is what will sustain you in between those infrequent masterpiece sales."

Résumé : Une passion pour le renouveau

Il n'y a pas beaucoup de populations plus « marginalisées » que les prisonniers de l'établissement Mountain, un pénitencier de sécurité moyenne de la région Lower Mainland de la C.-B. Depuis deux ans, l'établissement est devenu le site d'une expérience unique d'entreprise sociale : InsideArt, une coopérative de mise en marché pour les prisonniers qui travaillent le verre et le bois. C'est une idée qui a beaucoup de charme. Elle offre des compétences concrètes et des liens positifs avec le monde extérieur qui donneront à la libération conditionnelle plus d'attrait et de meilleures chances de succès.

L'entreprise a exigé des compromis troublants. Elle n'a pas reçu de reconnaissance officielle et demeure un « passe-temps » auquel le Service correctionnel du Canada pourrait mettre fin à n'importe quel moment. Les exigences de sécurité quadruplent le temps nécessaire pour prendre et mettre en œuvre les décisions d'affaires courantes. Il n'y a pas eu assez de temps pour préparer les membres aux responsabilités de la gestion et la vente de leur art. Finalement, afin de surpasser l'énorme handicap commercial imposé par l'isolement, la coopérative a souhaité la

bienvenue à des membres non-incarcérés pour former un conseil d'intendance afin d'accélérer le processus de prise de décision.

Néanmoins, le retour sur l'investissement de la coopérative semble prometteur. Trois membres démontrent présentement un intérêt pour la libération conditionnelle – une économie annuelle de 90 000 \$ pour les payeurs de taxes. « Ça m'a fait réaliser qu'il y a encore des personnes à l'extérieur qui apprécient qui je suis », a dit un des membres « et ça m'a donné le goût de vouloir devenir une meilleure personne ». ■

Events soon proved Sid right. We were accepted to vend at the 2005 Circle Craft show, the largest retail Christmas show in Western Canada (only one in five applicants are accepted). We sold \$7,000 in \$15 tealight holders and angels. Not one large piece sold. The “inmate thing,” we learned there and elsewhere, was all well and good, but the product must appeal to the tastes of the buying public and be affordably priced. If we brought only tealights (but with more designs) to the next Circle Craft, Sid and I told the members, we could easily triple our revenues.

They were having none of that. They were artists and were as offended by the label “producer” as they were by “hobbyist.”

Still, I can’t say that threw the co-op’s business plan off the rails. We didn’t have one. Over that first year of co-op development, the pressure to sell was building while we struggled with the prison’s policy environment. The Circle Craft opportunity and all that it entailed (portfolio creation, testing product designs, obtaining financing, purchasing supplies, packaging, and building the booth itself) overshadowed medium- to long-term planning. The tyranny of opportunity trumped all. As cobbler’s children go barefoot, so too did the business counsellor’s project proceed without a business plan.

Member Autonomy & Independence . . . or Profits?

In retrospect, a business plan for InsideArt would have been much like software: nearly obsolete from the gate. So much of the co-op’s activity depended on the (unpredictable) prison environment, that any concrete and time-specific plans were quelled by the system.

In the co-op’s short life, for instance, we have seen four new wardens at Mountain Institution. Imagine a change in government and how it affects CED projects! This was the same, only in a micro context. At the end of the day, the prison could control who and what moved in and out of the prison. The rules and levels of respect seemed to change with each warden. In that sense, the co-op had to proceed at Mountain’s pace and within its strictures.

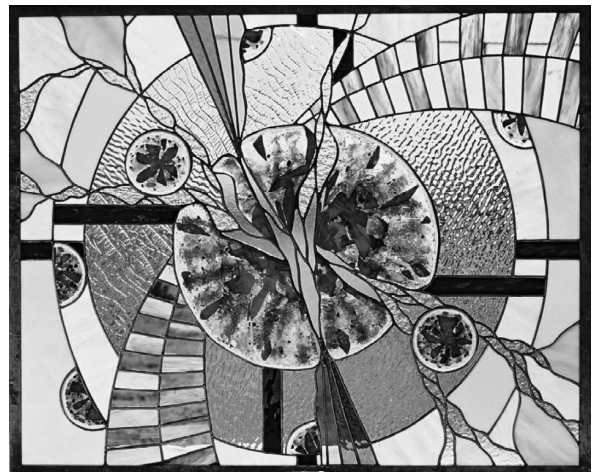
We soon discovered what we coined the “4:1 rule.” Whatever needs doing in regular business takes at least four times as long in prison due to the paperwork and communication with CSC that was required. The extended mid-day inmate count alone sucked two hours out of an already short work day. Had we realized that we would have needed at least two full-time people to do the work planned, I doubt if we would have had the nerve to step out and ask CDI for the necessary funding.

Add to this the fact that, because the co-op was about building the capacity of members, we were teaching them every aspect of business so they could run the business themselves in time. In traditional business development, we counsel folks to do what they are good at, and hire out areas such as bookkeeping, marketing, or web development. In the case of InsideArt, we were

teaching all these skills and expecting to launch within two years, based on member contribution. If we wanted to turn a profit quickly, this was a very tall order. Some members had never held jobs in the community, let alone ever run businesses. The fourth principle of co-operation, “autonomy and independence” abutted against the push for profits, fast.

In fact, we have since learned that the inmates expected that, once the co-op was officially incorporated, co-ordinators and developers would leave the members to run the co-op. The members’ analogy was of a mother letting her young adult out into the world to make his own mistakes. To my mind, the incorporation was closer to a birth; leaving a child at this point would have been something akin to malevolent neglect.

This was a real and growing source of tension, epitomized by the choice of a logo for the co-op. An expert designer generously contributed an idea at a very low fee, but the inmates preferred



one of their own, which resembled a tattoo. They even conducted a survey of inmates and staff that narrowly confirmed that selection, and then finally selected the designer’s work anyway. That was a smart move, and I was very proud of the members for making it. Even so, there remained a lingering resentment that power had been wrested from them.

A Multi-Stakeholder Co-Op

By late 2006, Sid and I were by no means the only outmates who touched InsideArt. Videographer Cindy Harris documented the co-op’s development process and was captivated by the situation. Slowly, then with greater frequency, media, an IT teacher, an educator, and marketing experts like Louise were connected with the co-op. Co-op developer Melanie Conn provided expertise and encouragement. A bridge was taking shape between the isolation of the institution and the possibilities of the outside world.



Although a separate legal entity, there was the sense that InsideArt was a “program” of Corrections. Programs came and went, and we felt this threat acutely. With some non-incarcerated artists like Sid as members, however, could we not show that InsideArt was broader than its inmate members? Corrections could not shut down an entity whose owners included members of the general public.

So early this year, we moved to a multi-stakeholder co-operative structure. Non-incarcerated members (who do not market through the co-op) act as a stewarding body that is accountable to the general co-op membership.

On the upside, this structure offers more stability, and has attracted a few high-profile organizations to the board. Taking meetings out of the prison domain has streamlined our communications and decision-making processes immensely. A couple of meetings to resolve issues surrounding accountability, access, and authority ... and both inmates and outmates accepted the new structure as a solution to an organizational difficulty, rather than an issue of power and control.

But like it or not, the restructuring has left inmates out of that core decision-making loop. So is InsideArt still a co-op? Or maybe that question mistakes the means for the end. Maybe the real question is this: is InsideArt *working* and will the restructuring make it work better?

Sustainability

To look at the details of my CDI proposal, I was convinced that InsideArt would be completely financially self-sustaining within

two years. This was a goal that I made very clear and that the members adopted very early in the development process. Yet this is barely reasonable for a regular business. Just factor in the 4:1 rule and the capacity challenges of members, and the odds for achieving it were long indeed. CDI generously extended a third year of support, which ended in March. Community Futures supports my time spent on the co-op, but, due to budget constraints, this amounts to less than one day weekly.

This year, InsideArt has adopted a more realistic definition of sustainability. Like other social enterprises, we now distinguish between the co-op’s business costs and its social costs. InsideArt will achieve “sustainability” when its business costs are covered by business revenues, and its social costs by grants and government payments. Sales are unlikely ever to cover the social costs of the co-operative.

But financial sustainability is not the only way to measure success. The average annual cost of keeping one male inmate in the federal prison system is \$90,000. One of InsideArt’s outcomes has been to move three inmates from refusing correctional programming to embracing it as a means of transition to a community that they have begun to see as welcoming. If CDI’s \$140,000 contribution results in just one of those three exiting the correctional system two years before they would have otherwise, the investment would have saved the public \$180,000.

Not a bad return. Add to this the greater likelihood that this man would exit the system equipped with positive community connections, plus the greater likelihood of work, supplemented by art sales, and the return on investment is greater still.

As for the co-op’s *social* return on investment, Cindy’s video documents the outstanding improvement in confidence and communication that has occurred. The words of Phil Clement capture it better still. Founding Chair of InsideArt, Phil passed away this May at 48 years of age, while serving his 31st year in prison. He was the co-op’s true leader, the barometer by which all other members set their hopes and dreams:

“...no matter what unfolds, I have no regrets. These past years, I have been a different man. I will always give you credit for bringing a new perspective into my life. We have had highs and lows. Bottom line, it all made me realize that there are still people out there that appreciate who I am, and that led me to want to be a better person. Life is a work in progress. Since the co-op, it feels like a new beginning. I will keep this whether the co-op lives or dies.”



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Artwork (previous page) “After Seven,” by Dean Roberts and (above) Hummingbirds, a co-production of Dean Roberts, Mark Jarman, and the late Phil Clement, all founding Board members of InsideArt. All photos in this article courtesy of InsideArt Cooperative.