A Tale of Two Crossovers

One strong feature of the nonprofit sector is peer learning and cross working. With no distinct departments or functions often, a small team handles it all. Fundraising and communication go hand-in-hand. We crossed over to two diverse causes to understand how they steer their efforts to achieve both successfully.

1. How did a crossover of ideas lead to the foundation of the cause?

Grow-Trees was founded in 2010, as an e-greeting platform. Planted trees, which are on our website could be purchased and one received an eTreeCertificate® to greet loved ones, employees, clients, vendors, etc. on various occasions, or even to run a worldwide marketing campaign.

A change in the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) norms helped expand our horizons and accept funds which corporate organisations had allocated as a part of their CSR. Grow-Trees has aligned itself with numerous NGOs and Multi-National Corporates and planted over 5 million trees across 20 states of India, with partnerships across the globe.

e-Greeting is widely accepted globally.
There is ease of use and affordability. Moreover, with the worsening effects of climate change, reforestation brings about of a ray of hope for a better future. Most now prefer sustainable gifts over others to express their support in the battle against this global environmental degradation. An ecologically sustainable approach helps offset carbon footprint leading to acceptance of reforestation and afforestation since the last few years.

113 million adolescent girls are an invisible population in India. Due to socio-cultural practices and conditioning, they are denied autonomy and a chance to discover their full potential.

The Gender Lab (incubated within the Blue Ribbon Movement Trust in 2015) aims at empowering adolescent girls in schools with 21st century skills to become changemakers in their community and break gender stereotypes. We deliver this through a fellowship of young women across India who mentor these girls through 10 months to build leadership, self-awareness and sisterhood. Our fellows are taking bold steps to shift the gender narrative in their families & workplaces. This year, 10 fellows in Mumbai and Haryana worked with 6500 girls who in turn, worked with 20000+ citizens in their communities across various issues. This multi layered service-learning model makes our work unique.

We also realise the need for engaging adolescent boys as allies. We create a safe space for them in schools to build awareness around gender, redefine masculinity and engage them in community action.

Our belief is that sustainable social change needs to start from within. If individual mindsets change then there will be long term change across generations.

2. What has worked for you within Fundraising?

We have run campaigns that appeal to the mass audience, spread awareness about the cause, and eventually lead to an increase in our work.
In collaboration with Ola, we ran a marketing campaign where for a period of one week, Ola users had access to a special contribution page, wherein they could contribute in multiples of INR 5, as compared to the per tree cost of INR 85. Ola matched the contribution made by its users and the entire sum of money was contributed towards tree plantation. With a minimal contribution of INR 5, users could sense a feeling of gratification and choose to e-Greet their friends and family in the future.

MakeMyTrip and Pepperfry also had similar campaigns. At the end of a timeframe, based on the contributions received, the number of trees get planted via Grow-Trees. com. MakeMyTrip Foundation has planted about 140,000 trees through this model in the last 2 years.

Grow-Trees also builds landing pages for corporates, where the users of the latter can be redirected from their website to the landing page created on our website and choose to plant trees at their own capacity. This is one of the most successful models of collaboration while touching various socio-ecological themes like water rejuvenation, habitat conservation for wildlife, upliftment of rural communities, etc.

Our focused approach on building gender equality helped in connecting to the larger conversation around this space. Our intersectional and feminist approach to problem solving has ensured that we stick to our value system. This reflects in the way we engage with potential funders. What was difficult was to quantify the impact and hence stories and qualitative impact helped.

Diversity of donors really helps in sustaining the work. **Apart from philanthropists and CSR what has worked some of the schools have started contributing to the program because of the impact they have seen through the program.** Contribution ranges from Rs.10 to Rs. 800 per student depending on the kind of schools we work with. We run ongoing crowdfunding campaigns among our friends and family which work because of the trust they have in our work. Often, we also receive in-kind support, such as venues spaces.

Beyond financial we look at other contributions. As a part of our adolescent girls' and boys' program, we invite female & male role models to interact with our participants to further their learning. Though from diverse backgrounds, they remain connected and contribute to our journey in different ways lending their busy time and skills to our programme.

3. How do you pitch your work to the persons on the opposite side, donors, volunteers

It is always crucial to prove the work being done and the impact being generated. We have the following:
A. **Locate Tree-Project:** With each tree certificate, a unique code is provided, which is geo-tagged with the location of the plantation site. Live development can be seen on the plantation site via satellite imagery.
B. **Independent Audits:** Grow-Trees gets its projects independently audited by third-party auditors, after 1 year of plantation. The audit reports give the clients a fair idea of the species planted, their survival rate, methods of plantation used and measures taken to improve survivability.
C. **Replantation as per Audit:** After the audit report, the dead saplings are replanted once by Grow-Trees at no cost to the customers.
D. **Regular reporting mechanism:** Regular reportscontaining recent images, field status are shared with the donor organisations to give them an update of how the plants are doing.
E. **Site Visits:** Everyone is allowed to visit the plantation sites and look for themselves the status of the plantation. In cases where the project has been adopted by an organisation, team visits are also organised with meetings arranged with the local planting partners, village heads and the rural communities.

A group of 13-year-old girls from Malvani, Mumbai, wrote to the local MLA and ensured that the public toilet in their community was cleaned and repaired.
13 year old Yash, after participating in our program, says that he will never participate in domestic violence and that if he sees it around him he will do everything to stop it.

These experiences shape their mindset, behaviour and actions as they grow up. We dream of every adolescent in the world experiencing such an opportunity.

Our fellow Anupama running TGL in Delhi since 3 years shares "After the fellowship I stopped being afraid of speaking up about what is wrong, no matter what the consequences. I learnt that I just cannot compromise on anything less than what I feel I deserve; I have been able to create an independent life for myself and I am trying to nourish that independence every day."

Many more such stories of change and empowerment make us proud. **3 fellows have joined us after the fellowship as part of our core team, actively taking decisions to shape the way ahead and growth of The Gender Lab.**

4. Do you see a connect between FR & Communications

Even though word of mouth is still the most powerful tool in the CSR sector, communications and marketing are also steadily taking their place. With a firm media presence, it is possible to reach out to more people at the same time.

Moreover, with new organisations emerging in the field of forestation, it has become important to build relevant digital media presence.

However, an even important aspect of that is reaching the right audience. Recently, we have been also focusing on our social media presence, revamping the content we share to bring clarity in what we do and how we do it. Communication via videos has been the healthiest means for us yet. There's so much that can be said in a 1-minute video. We often receive queries after all our campaigns, highlighting its success.

With the digital media presence, we have seen a rise in awareness, helping us raise funds in a shorter span of time.

We try to be authentic and build trust, transparency and reflect our culture in our communication. Appropriately capturing the essence of work, it's USP, value and impact influence our communication which in turn influences our diverse stakeholders and raising resources.

What has worked for us is 'listening' to our stakeholders - whether its beneficiaries or potential donors and then incorporating their suggestions and feedback to strengthen our program design and proposals. When we were designing our boys program, we understood the need to engage with boys as allies in building gender equality emerged, which resulted in a win-win for all.

Also, we have seen people who experience our work on the field and get inspired are the ones who support our work the most, so we make it a point to encourage our donors and volunteers to visit our schools/ fellows and experience the impact. Seeing is believing and believing leads to supporting.

5. What one learning would you take from the corporate sector and what one learning would you give to the corporate sector?

Learning to take: One is only as strong as the statistics backing them. For every product or service to flourish, one must be affluent with the raw data and statistics of the market. In order to prove your mettle, data analysis and reporting mechanism should be extremely strong.
Learning to give: The idea of social enterprises is very new to India. Although we function as a corporate but the work at the grassroots still remain with the rural communities. We must be sensitive towards their apprehensions since they belong to backward and isolated tribes, who are yet to familiarise with the modernisation. Coordination with them can be a time-consuming task and the same should be considered at all points.

One learning for us from the corporate sector would be how they create a distinct identity for themselves and are able to look at scale differently.

What we as a social sector organisation can share is our approach of frugality, resourcefulness and creating a large-scale impact with a small team. Being a small team means each person has multiple roles to manage which enriches the personal growth and learning process . Last but not the least, the aspect of culture of care, shared power, accountability with love, empathy, openness and equality.