

Advancing Transparency in Philanthropy

Editor's note: In January 2010, the Foundation Center launched Glasspockets, a website that promotes online transparency and accountability practices among foundations. Below is an interview with Janet Camarena, director of the Foundation Center's San Francisco office, who manages Glasspockets.

Responsive Philanthropy: *A year since launching Glasspockets, what have you learned about how foundations are viewing transparency?*

Janet Camarena: First, let me provide some background regarding why we launched Glasspockets. As you may know, the Foundation Center was established in 1956, during a period of increased foundation scrutiny stemming from the McCarthyism that was so pervasive at the time. Russell Leffingwell, then chairman of the Carnegie Corporation, coined the phrase in his congressional testimony: "We think the foundation should have glass pockets." That is to say, philanthropy is best served by proving it has nothing to hide. From the beginning, Leffingwell and the other foundation leaders who helped found the Center felt it was critically important that our mission focus on providing transparency for the field of philanthropy. This has been our professional calling ever since, making Glasspockets very much a mission-based project that connects us to our roots.

Today, as more and more people are accessing greater quantities of information online, pressure on foundations to be more transparent about their opera-



Janet Camarena

tions and about how they fulfill their missions to serve the public good is increasing. Therefore, Glasspockets was the result of a natural evolution of our original mission and the changes we are seeing in the field of information and knowledge management. Adding to these elements the demographic changes across the sector that are driving the demand for more inclusiveness and openness, we now face the perfect storm for this transparency movement and the Glasspockets website.

Not only has the response from the foundation community been almost uniformly positive, but we also are impressed by the number of communications officers and foundation leaders who are reaching out to us to learn more and to find out how they can participate.

One of the elements of the Glasspockets website that has attracted the greatest response is the "Who Has Glass Pockets?" template, which provides foundations with a way to assess their own transparency and accounta-

bility practices and to compare them to those of their peers. We are also seeing a growing number of foundations exploring social media and other online mediums designed to increase the visibility of philanthropy at work. In 2010, we issued a report¹ on this trend.

We feel we've sparked a movement, and that's just what we hoped to do. We're excited about the growing number of foundations that really get it – that understand what is at stake – and we're excited to play a part in this progress.

RP: *Do you think that Glasspockets has helped increased transparency among foundations?*

JC: The anecdotal evidence is clear: Raising awareness and raising expectations about the value of transparency is causing foundations to rethink what information they make public and how they make consumers aware of that new level of openness. Glasspockets has helped encourage that. We've also seen a number of smaller foundations stepping up, ready and willing to show us their "glass pockets." It's promising to see this; whereas in the beginning we were the ones reaching out, now the majority of profiles are coming in unsolicited. These include not only big, private foundations, but we're also seeing interest from small organizations, community foundations and grantmaking public charities as well.

RP: *How is Glasspockets reaching those foundations who are not already proponents of transparency?*

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JC: The single most important thing for us to do is to involve more foundations in the conversation. In the past year, we have benefitted immensely from solid media exposure focused on the value of transparency in the field, and that, in part, has helped get foundations talking about what other foundations are doing. Whether through speaking at conferences or blogging about the subject, we are taking steps to keep that conversation going. As demands for transparency grow and foundations look (for some, albeit reluctantly) for better ways to communicate, Glasspockets stands as a resource and model.

The development, evolution and outreach of Glasspockets also is supported by our key partners: the Communications Network,² Grantmakers for Effective Organizations,³ the Center for Effective Philanthropy⁴ and One World Trust.⁵ Their insights and ideas - not to mention their own efforts - have proven invaluable in building awareness of Glasspockets in the foundation community. Of course, we would also be excited to welcome additional partners to join us and help spread the word.

RP: *What are your plans for Glasspockets this coming year?*

JC: In 2011, we are looking to expand greatly the breadth of foundations represented and hoping to add many more "Who Has Glass Pockets?" profiles. Because the profiles are entirely voluntary, we rely on interest within the community; the more foundations that submit their practices⁶ to Glasspockets,

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the more likely that others will, too.

Another hope for Glasspockets in 2011 is that we are cultivating an environment for some much-needed, deeper conversation in the foundation community. During the last few months, we launched Transparency Talk,⁷ the Glasspockets blog about best practices in foundation transparency and accountability. With commentaries ranging from the meaning of the Giving Pledge to the value of social media in foundation communications, from discussions of program failure to reconsideration of performance assessment, Transparency Talk has quickly become a platform for sharing the incredible range of ideas and voices found in the foundation community. The blog also includes our own “Glasspockets Finds,” some foundation transparency practices that can serve as helpful examples for the field as a whole.

We also recently launched our Transparency Heat Map⁸ - a compelling visual display of what information foundations are (or are not) sharing and a source of good examples for any foundation looking to emulate the practices of other organizations. From one concise web page you can link directly to the investment policies or

diversity practices of a variety of foundations.

RP: *What is your vision for Glasspockets 5 years from now?*

JC: We picture Glasspockets, five years from now, having helped create an atmosphere in which foundations no longer think twice about communicating what they do, how they do it and why they choose particular goals. Glasspockets can establish a level of expectations with which foundations and the public have a better awareness of each other's concerns - so that the intersection of public good and private interest is seen as a place that encourages dialogue, rather than conflict and suspicion.

One simple way we might see change is through a fundamental increase in the number of foundations that provide information online. Our own statistics show that less than one-third of foundations today have websites, and the vast majority of foundations simply do not have the staff to maintain an online presence. Luckily, the Foundation Center has taken up this cause through our Foundation Folders program,⁹ in which we create free websites for foundations - no matter how big or small.

Glasspockets provides a template for what information is valuable to share via those websites-as well as sites created independently by foundations.

RP: *What is the connection between transparency and accountability? How does Glasspockets contribute to accountability in the sector?*

JC: The effect of Glasspockets' mission is two-fold. First, we're encouraging foundations to really show that they have nothing to hide. Second, we're normalizing the idea that foundations are active members of the community and need not be seen as inscrutable monoliths. In talking about transparency, we've taken our cue from our partner, One World Trust, which has really helped us conceptualize the ideas at the core of Glasspockets. One World Trust defines accountability as a virtue made up of four elements, one of which is transparency (in addition to evaluation, complaint and response procedures and participation). We designed the “Who Has Glass Pockets” assessment - and the Glasspockets website as a whole - with this definition in mind.

For foundations to be really effective in serving the public good, they not only have to pursue transformative ideas, they also have to be answerable to the people they affect (the communities they serve as well as the general public). In this way, foundations that are genuinely accountable not only make information readily available (transparency), but they actively seek out dialogue with those interested in knowing how and why they pursue specific goals.

RP: *How do you want foundations to use Glasspockets in their organization's overall efforts to improve their transparency?*

JC: Glasspockets' goal is to showcase best practices and to encourage found-



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dations to emulate good ideas. Communications staff members tell us they often use our 23-point assessment as a checklist when discussing elements that need to be added to a foundation website and report that Glasspockets has helped them make an effective case for being as transparent as possible. The more foundations that participate in this manner, the more good examples of transparency we can share with the field. We can't ask for more than that.

With Glasspockets, we've also created a space in which one can find several examples of real-life policy. For instance, a foundation looking to create a diversity policy can now see what other foundations are doing in their efforts to do the same and the rationale that shaped their practices. Our Transparency Heat Map offers access to more than a dozen examples, all linked from one page. All of a sudden, a task that might have required significant research can be informed immedi-

ately with key models from peers. The same is true with social media. From the Transparency 2.0¹⁰ area on Glasspockets, you can visit every foundation on Facebook and get a glimpse of what they have to offer. It's great for anyone considering wading into those waters.

Finally, we want to build on the knowledge base and conversation that has already started at Glasspockets and through our Transparency Talk blog and podcasts. If you are a foundation professional, consider joining this important conversation!

Through initiatives like Glasspockets, the Foundation Center is playing a leading role in galvanizing a transparency movement within philanthropy by demonstrating the many positive steps that foundations are already taking and encouraging foundations to learn from their peers. We know this will increase public trust in foundations as greater numbers of foundations openly communicate information about their governance,

procedures, programs, and impact to the public. At the same time, greater transparency will reduce duplication of effort in the field and facilitate greater collaboration among foundations. It's a win-win all around. ■

Notes

1. "Are Foundation Leaders Using Social Media?" *Grantmaker Leadership Panel Report* (New York: Foundation Center, September 2010) http://foundationcenter.org/gainknowledge/research/pdf/social_media.pdf.
2. <http://comnetwork.org/>
3. <http://www.geofunders.org/>
4. <http://www.effectivephilanthropy.org/>
5. <http://oneworldtrust.org/>
6. Online submission at: http://glasspockets.org/inside/whgp/submit_form.html
7. <http://blog.glasspockets.org/>
8. http://glasspockets.org/inside/whgp/profiles/whgp_map_by_freq.html
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