



Cultural Innovation in Action

Case Studies from 2011 Grantees
of The Rockefeller Foundation's
NYC Cultural Innovation Fund

OurGoods

PREPARED BY:

EmcArts Inc.



OURGOODS

OurGoods.org is an online barter network for creative people.

Introduction

About OurGoods

OurGoods, says co-founder Caroline Woolard, is “an online barter network for creative people—a way to connect artists, designers, and activists and enable them to trade skills, spaces, and objects in the service of independent projects.” Founded during the economic crisis of 2008, OurGoods aims to facilitate a stronger, more sustainable network of cultural producers and to promote the value of cultural abundance in an economy driven by scarcity. The site matches barter partners, provides accountability tools, and offers technical assistance resources. Trade School, a pop-up storefront for education, offers classes for barter only and connects artists in real-world interactions that develops working relationships and expands the labor community. OurGoods has an annual budget that ranges from \$50,000 to \$80,000 per year.

About the Project

With a grant from the NYC Cultural Innovation Fund, OurGoods undertook capacity-building initiatives aimed at attracting a sufficient number of users to match the diversity of barter requests; improving the design and functionality of its website; and developing a workable and sustainable funding model.

Process

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The heart of our idea is that support doesn't have to be monetary... we still have skills that are valuable, and we actually inherently want to work together to make our passion projects possible.

- **Caroline Woolard**
Co-founder

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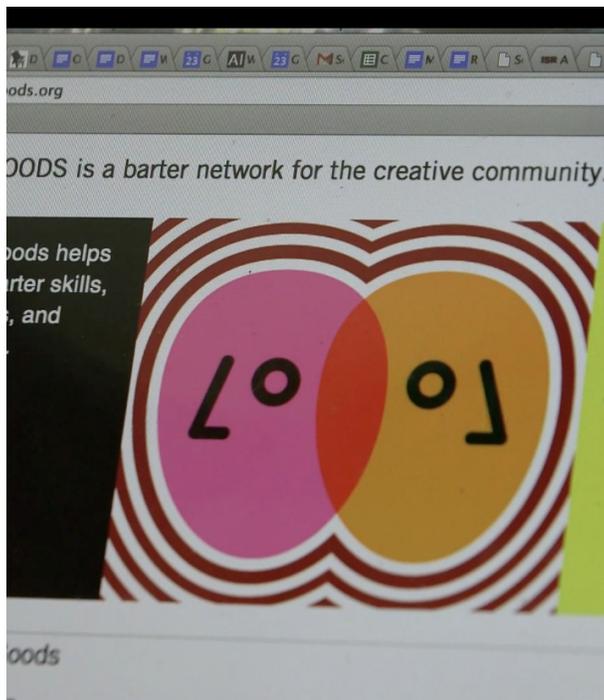
Starting Conditions

When OurGoods' five founders set out to establish a new model for making goods and services available to artists, the economic crisis of 2008 was exacting a heavy toll, particularly on those artists who do not typically enjoy the benefits of information and knowledge-sharing offered by service organizations to artists associated with institutions. Despite their isolation, however, these artists are nimble, comfortable with experimentation, and capable of testing new ideas quickly. How, wondered the founders, could they harness the energy and talents of artists in service to each other? How could they shift the focus from asking how artists could get more money to asking the deeper question of how artists might get more resources?

By 2008, the practice of resource sharing was exploding, driven by new technologies and the growth of social media, but although the trend was common in many sectors, it had not yet begun serving independent artists. Existing barter and recycling sites—such as Freecycle, Craigslist, SwapTree and others—focused on manufactured objects and allowed users to operate anonymously. Trust among individuals was not a driving factor in transactions. A successful network model for artists, OurGoods leaders knew, would have to be different. It would have to be based on creating mutual respect among a large and diverse creative community.

Woolard describes her team's initial motivation. “The heart of our idea is that support doesn't have to be monetary, and even if the economy collapses, we still have skills that are valuable, and we actually inherently want to work together to make our passion projects possible.” At the same time, Woolard knew that turning this collaborative spirit into collective action would mean overturning

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the dominant funding economy, which values the output of artists (completed artworks) far less than it values the inputs into creation (rehearsal space, materials, skill, time and energy). Her vision—shared with her partners—was to sidestep this persistent imbalance by helping cultural producers exchange directly with each other.

For two years, the five founders—Caroline Woolard, Rich Watts, Louise Ma, Jen Abrams, and Carl Tashian—formed a powerful team and launched the OurGoods website. But it was a lean operation, and the founders were volunteers. They knew they had to invent a workable economic model in order to sustain the site and pay themselves to manage it. The NYC Cultural Innovation Fund provided the leverage they needed.

Prototyping

OurGoods already had a functioning website, but what the NYC Cultural Innovation Fund grant provided was important funding to pay staff on a part-time basis to improve the site's usability, and to enable the organization to develop new partnerships that would make it more solid and sustainable.

Enhancing the usability of the website was the primary activity of the prototyping period. OurGoods conducted interviews and surveys of members and non-members to identify and prioritize desirable upgrades to the site. With this input, OurGoods staff implemented several critical upgrades, including a redesigned homepage that includes a live feed indicating the newest "Haves" and "Needs" in order to make the site feel more live and current; redesigned profile pages for members to include more information; an expanded resource center, including information about how to create a successful bartering relationship; improved barter contracts; and better new member orientation.

Changes in Assumptions

Listening to members was new for OurGoods. Staff admit that "integrating usability testing into our development process created an important shift. In the past, we relied on our own instincts and desires to guide site improvements. Now, we

are more data-driven and responsive to our membership. Our members have helped us discover where our site was inadequate, and that feedback has become critical to our development process.”

One visitor behavior also caused staff concern and led them to change their approach to the site. When the original site was designed, non-members could not browse without joining. As a result, OurGoods saw a large number of visitors who joined simply for the chance to browse, but then never returned. Activity among users was, therefore, lower than expected. Staff acknowledged that making the site initially proprietary did not serve recruitment, and now visitors must join only when they wish to propose a barter.

Founder Jen Abrams laughs when she describes how the grant changed the organization’s fundamental assumption. “The grant changed us in every possible way,” she says. “In the beginning, it got very confusing because we were a site about not using money... but then there was money.” As disruptive as it might have seemed early on, however, the money was central to the success of OurGoods’ prototyping phase. “We began this project because we knew that if the network were to thrive, we had to increase membership and provide some financial security for our co-founding team,” says Woolard. This represented a movement to a natural next phase more than a shift in assumptions.”

Obstacles and Enablers

The ability to finally pay staff was perhaps the primary enabler of OurGoods’s success. Woolard and Abrams agree. “The ability to pay ourselves has made us significantly more accountable to each other and to the project. We work harder, we get more done, and we are better able to meet deadlines and generally move the organization forward much more aggressively.” This new sense of organizational accountability has also helped leaders focus on the big picture, and they have held retreats to develop their ability to work together, including identifying strengths and weaknesses, and clarifying vision and goals.

The biggest driver of innovation in the organization, leaders say, is “the sheer energy and excitement we each feel around our mission, together with the overwhelmingly enthusiastic responses we’ve found in the artmaking community.” The more time they spend interacting with users and potential users of OurGoods, the more possibilities they see for innovation. “Our greatest strength,” says Woolard, “is that we are still a new idea. Every problem to be solved is still an opportunity for innovation.” Highly functioning technology is the foundation of OurGoods’s success, and the better and more user-friendly the website, the greater the use. At the same time, leaders say that technology is not the only enabler of success. “We’re coming to understand after all this time that what the website needs to do is hold space for what’s happening in the real world,” says Woolard. “More and more we’re coming back to the importance of face to face community building, and we do many in-person events to complement the software.”

The biggest challenge, say staff, has been the inability to improve the site as quickly as members might like. The lack of institutional infrastructure, including full-time employees, causes problems for administration and member recruitment, but it is a much larger challenge on the software development side of the organization. Competition for coder time is fierce, and finding people to expand the OurGoods coding team continues to be an enormous challenge. “We simply have many more ideas than we have capacity to implement them,” say staff. One big upheaval occurred during prototyping when Rich Watts moved on to other interests and Carl Tashian was offered full-time employment elsewhere. It was a big blow for the organization. “We started with a well-rounded creative team of creative technologists and artists, and it worked well,” says Woolard, “and all of a sudden we had to transition from a five-person team of co-founders to paying computer engineers per feature. We hadn’t yet understood the scope of being technical program managers, and we had to fail more than once in not laying out our ideas concretely enough. It took a long time to go from founders to a management system, but we made it, and we enjoy working together.”

Impact

By the Numbers

OurGoods reports a 270 percent increase in the overall number of site users during the grant period—up from 1,950 to 5,413. More importantly, the percentage of active users (those who post at least one “have” or “need”) increased significantly as well. Before the grant, approximately 20 percent of users were considered active. Now, the site boasts 73 percent active users. During the grant period, 1,162 people participated in at least one exchange—up from 309. At the same time, OurGoods has built new collaborative relationships with more than 20 organizational partners, including educational institutions, funders, arts and cultural organizations, and resource-sharing organizations.

New Pathways to Public Value

On a practical level, Woolard and Abrams add that the NYC Cultural Innovation Fund grant enabled them to improve the OurGoods site “exponentially” by hiring computer engineers at the front and back ends who “could be part of our team in a robust way we hadn’t had in the past.” The grant also provided visibility to a small organization and opened new doors for support, dramatically changing the conversations the organization has with potential funders.

They are quick to say, however, that they cannot take credit for developing the resource-sharing

concept, but they have brought it home to the arts community. “Resource-sharing is already happening, but we’re helping make that shift,” they say, adding, “When money mediates transactions, the value is finite. When we barter, we get the value of the object/service, and we form relationships that connect artists to new professional opportunities, form the basis of friendships, and respond to changing conditions within our artistic community.”

In the OurGoods world, barter creates value, but it also causes artists to rethink their relationship to value in a market economy. “The market sets prices and remuneration for cultural production that bear little resemblance to the value artists put on each other’s work, or to the value derived by their audience,” say Woolard and Abrams. “By allowing users to self-value skills and objects, we create a new model for valuing cultural production and for legitimizing the work of artists outside institutions and art markets. Within this alternative economy, we can increase cultural dialogue and create an environment of abundance and community.”

The OurGoods team hopes this project will shift the way the independent art-makers of New York City think about their resources. “We find ourselves buoyed by a broader cultural zeitgeist around sharing and the new economy,” they say. “Organizations seeking to stay in step with this zeitgeist have sought us out, and we are regularly asked to speak and lead workshops. The coincidence of our core mission with the cultural moment has greatly amplified our impact.”

Learn More

Visit ArtsFwd.org to watch a short documentary about this project and learn more about the 2011 Grantees of The Rockefeller Foundation's NYC Cultural Innovation Fund.

Profile written by: Catherine Maciariello for EmcArts

All images: Meerkat Media

About The Rockefeller Foundation's NYC Cultural Innovation Fund

Through the NYC Cultural Innovation Fund, the Rockefeller Foundation invested \$16.3 million over six years to increase capacity for cultural innovation. The NYC Cultural Innovation Fund sought to reflect the creative aspirations of low-income and minority people, and to contribute to the development of theory and practice of integrating the arts into efforts to achieve cultural equity and community resilience.

The NYC Cultural Innovation Fund supported a diverse portfolio of experiments, explorations and innovations by 86 different cultural and community organizations in New York City. The Fund helped organizations experiment with new artistic programs and imaginative audience engagement strategies; involve community residents in creating work; present art in unconventional venues where it can be seen by a larger public; showcase work of minority artists and immigrant cultures; and pilot new revenue-generating approaches to sustain artists.

www.rockefellerfoundation.org

About EmcArts

EmcArts is a social enterprise for learning and innovation in the arts. We envision a time when participating in art is recognized as lying at the core of human potential. EmcArts is dedicated to advancing a resilient not-for-profit sector that can make this vision a daily reality. Our programs support individuals, organizations, and communities on their journey to becoming highly adaptive.

www.emcart.org

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