



## Thinking “Outside the Building”

### *Relevant Strategies for Next-Level Action*

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*Even though we focus on zoos and aquariums in this article, many of these strategies would apply equally well to organizations of all types.*

Successful leaders of nonprofit institutions - especially zoos and aquariums - have always been adept at thinking “outside the box” in developing plans to engage donors, provide novel guest experiences, and achieve financial and organizational goals. Through this creative thinking, many zoos have flourished over the years, becoming beloved and valuable community assets.

Now, in these unprecedented times, we need to take it even further and think “**outside the building**” as we confront the challenges before us. Engaging in a new way of doing business now will enable us to marshal the resources necessary to emerge from the crisis intact - perhaps a little battered, but certainly not beaten – and ready to welcome back a community in need of the diversion and joy that our zoos and aquariums have always provided to our visitors.

Below we have outlined 7 key “outside the building” thinking strategies nonprofit leaders should consider now:

#### 1. **Talk to your bankers.**

Money is cheap now, so consider borrowing and using endowment or reserve funds as collateral for the loan rather than drawing them down. Working with your banker, make a plan to cap off the loan and pay it back over the longest possible period of time. With a financing plan in place, determine how to proceed and **don’t be afraid to invest** – focus on core values and key re-opening initiatives as you move through this period of time.

#### 2. **Use your Board.**

Your Board is composed of community and business leaders who are there to support you, voted onto your Board because of specific experience, skills, connections or knowledge. **Tap into it!** Draw on their diverse skill sets and capabilities to support your planning efforts and contribute to new ideas.

#### 3. **Collaborate and communicate with partners.**

You’ve developed relationships with vendors, consultants, and colleagues over the years that should be leaned into now to both offer and provide support to each other.

- For contracted relationships: Instead of canceling contracts or plans outright, discuss ways to **re-negotiate** terms or suspend activity for a period of time. These services may be more valuable and necessary to you than ever before as time goes on, so you’ll want to respect and protect these relationships.

- For zoo colleagues: Talk to each other. Share what's working for you and ask for advice. In regions of the country where there is more than one zoo or aquarium in the region, work with each other to address concerns. Develop a plan to **pool animal and vet resources**, if needed, to maintain the highest standards of care.

#### 4. **Pivot to a four-day work week for essential staff.**

In an effort to avoid layoffs in other departments, develop a plan that guarantees 80% pay with additional vacation days. **Be open and communicate** with your staff. Include messages of team unity and camaraderie – “we are in this together” and “we will not forget you once we rebound.”

#### 5. **Develop a “Re-Opening Plan.”**

When the green light is given to re-open – and we will re-open! - zoos need to be up and running quickly, ready to welcome our guests back with open arms. Develop a plan to address free days, discounts/values, parking fees, new experiences, messaging, etc.

- Work with your food and retail partners to **align food and retail offerings** with “value offerings.”
- If re-opening is to be implemented in a phased or limited process, create **community programs** that utilize the zoo campus/open space – exercise classes, running clubs, yoga classes – offered at a discount price. Develop a **“timed-ticket” plan** to address the possibility of needing to control crowd capacity and/or limit visitation

#### 6. **Keep the Zoo Engaged with Community.**

Empower your most creative staff to develop new ways of maintaining contact with your audience and nurturing those relationships. Look at the amazing work being done by zoos and aquariums around the country, which is being shared virtually. Create your own **social media presence** and tag it using [#bringingthezootoyou](#) and [#closedbutstillcaring](#) – join the industry's efforts bringing our mission to our communities.

#### 7. **Get Creative with Donor Cultivation.**

Implement a creative cultivation plan utilizing all staff – but especially keepers and interpretive staffs – to **connect with donors in fun and unexpected ways** such as “Care Calls” where keepers tell donors how well the animals are doing. Support the staff with talking points and call coaching as necessary so they are empowered to engage the donors with confidence.

We at RS&S have been proud to work with the zoo and aquarium community for more than 3 decades. In that time, many of our relationships have grown from positive work collaborations into true friendships. We are here for you – for all of you. Whether engaged in active work with us right now, an old client, or a new friend we just haven't met yet, feel free to email us: [rbiddle@rssconsultantsllc.com](mailto:rbiddle@rssconsultantsllc.com) or [jmacauley@rssconsultantsllc.com](mailto:jmacauley@rssconsultantsllc.com). We are happy to discuss any of the ideas above or to serve as a sounding board for your creative thinking.