Case Study with Gilead Sciences

Collaboration between Cornerstone Theatre Company and Gilead Sciences, Inc. was initiated in 2007 for the purpose of creating and presenting three plays under the umbrella title *Beyond the Diagnosis*, aimed at addressing HIV treatment issues in the African-America community.

In 2007, Gilead was struggling to reach people “who would not come out to a lecture,” says Deborah Wafer, Gilead Senior Project Manager for Community Marketing, and brochures and PSAs weren’t working.

“Gilead was responding to studies in the field showing that people of color were far less likely to challenge their doctors, compared with their white counterparts who are more proactive,” says Artistic Director of Cornerstone Michael Garcés. Cornerstone’s long history of grassroots engagement with the African American community combined with an empowering creative methodology based on peer-to-peer storytelling provided the perfect answer to Gilead’s need to reach out more directly to individual African Americans affected by HIV.

The process began according to Cornerstone’s signature methodology, by gathering community members into story circles while the three playwrights listened to dozens of individual stories. Next, in-depth follow-up interviews were conducted with several participants, weaving their words into each of the plays. Because they are based on true stories, the plays are marked by an authenticity of character and voice, and a sometimes disarming honesty, making them very real and very accessible to members of the public and giving them a unique power to touch people on a deeply personal level.

The finished scripts were then shared with Gilead and passed through its legal department; the focus of the corporation’s content interventions is primarily to avoid references to either Gilead’s own or its competitors’ medications (e.g., the color of pills) and their side effects (e.g., hair loss), which allows Cornerstone to maintain their artistic freedom. Gilead also plays a hands-on role in recruiting participants through a network of AIDS Service Organizations and providing each participant a modest stipend, identifying and contracting with local venues, arranging for logistics related to the story circles and performances, and ultimately marketing the performances in each city.

The three plays were then presented in a staged-reading format in cities across America, where local community members were cast as actors, ensuring that local audiences would see themselves represented on stage, not just professional actors from outside the community. The criteria for which cities the plays were to be presented in was decided jointly by Cornerstone and Gilead. They targeted not just big cities but also smaller ones like Jackson where the epidemic is raging.
The plays are book-ended by facilitated dialogue with the audience, led by an expert facilitator. Typically, the dialogue explores why some of the HIV+ population is reluctant to seek medical care or to change medications, and how to empower people to make the positive choice to seek treatment and be active participants in their own care. Tailored for numerous cities – from Los Angeles to Detroit, Houston to Washington, DC – these evening presentations are powerful and educational. Wafer remembers how, following the performance in Jackson, “[Audiences] wanted to talk all night long!”

In addition to communities grappling with HIV/AIDS, conferences have been an important venue for Beyond the Diagnosis, giving Gilead and the project national visibility. In 2008, performances took place at both the National Minority AIDS Council’s annual HIV Prevention Leadership Summit, in Detroit, and at the United States Conference on AIDS, in Fort Lauderdale.

Gilead and Cornerstone’s successful partnership has begun to attract attention around the country. “The linkage of community-based, issue-oriented art making with international pharmaceutical profit making is the result of some highly sophisticated and mature organizations and individuals,” comments Robert H. Leonard, director of the Virginia Tech MFA program in Theater Arts. The partners further developed a multi-media curriculum and best-practices toolkit that serves as a resource to other organizations in the arts, healthcare, nonprofit and business communities that might wish to use this work as a model. This multi-media curriculum “has been one of the best ways for the company to measure the profitability of this program,” says Deborah Wafer. Not only is Cornerstone reaching the intended demographics through their live plays but now, with the curriculum, they are educating health care providers who can go on to then educate even more patients. “It’s grows exponentially from there” says Wafer, “word of mouth is a powerful tool. We are reaching people we’ve never even met, because when patients and healthcare professionals use the curriculum they become advocates and educators in the community and continue to spread that education.”

Cornerstone has also extended the culture of the Beyond the Diagnosis series, creating a set of bilingual plays for the Latino/Hispanic Community, and is slated in 2012 to be developed into a monolingual Spanish event.

Instead of the conventional formula, this partnership positions art/theater as a valuable community asset capable of reaching highly targeted audiences and touching them in a deeper and more impactful way than traditional education and marketing efforts.