

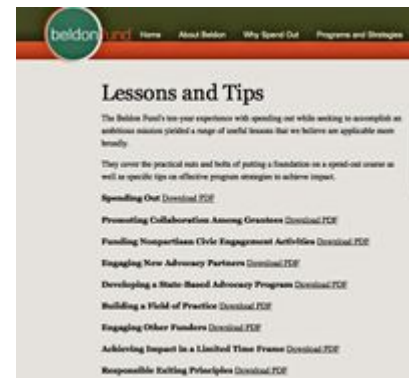
Tuesday, May 26, 2009

## ☞ Soon To Be Gone, But Not Forgotten

Not long ago [I wondered out loud](#) what it would be like to be the communications director for a foundation planning to spend down. I asked:

*“What would your final annual report say? How would you describe your foundation's accomplishments? Would you have the evidence to back up your claims? Or would those achievements rest on a pile of anecdotes destined to fade over time? Could you tell a story rich with lessons? Would your foundation be remembered for the impact it created and in a way that positively highlighted what philanthropy can accomplish when done well?”*

Little did I know that my mind experiment was being played out in real time with a clock ticking in the background at the Beldon Fund. In a few days, after having spent \$120 million over 10 years, the foundation is shutting its doors. And, to its credit, the foundation has gone to great lengths to make sure that although it soon will be gone, neither it nor its work will be forgotten. In fact, as part of its legacy, Beldon has created a [website](#) filled with what are described as lessons and practical information meant to be of use to other philanthropists, philanthropic advisors, foundations, and nonprofit advocacy organizations.



Some of the material on the Beldon site is information that should be useful to other foundations considering spending down, including how that process “affects financial strategy, staffing, operations and grantmaking programs.” And, to ensure people benefit from lessons Beldon learned from its program work, the rest of the content comprises case stories and evaluations of the foundation's efforts to help the nonprofits it supported successfully advocate for sound environmental policies.

It's worth noting that Beldon has never had an in-house communications department. Instead -- and before it was too late -- it hired Thea Lurie, an independent communications consultant, to help the foundation capture its story and develop a strategy for communicating it to specific audiences it wants to influence. “We were too close the work to tell the story ourselves,” says Anita Nager, executive director of the Beldon Fund. “Thea helped us draw out the themes and principles that characterized our grantmaking and then illustrated these themes with case stories and practical lessons.”

One of those lessons, Nager adds, is that a foundation in the process spending down “doesn't have a lot of time to recover” from errors. Thus Nager hopes that the information Beldon is leaving behind will “make the spend out process understandable and less daunting” to

foundations either contemplating or committed doing the same and also to “demonstrate the potent combination of spend out and advocacy grantmaking.”

I guess we can't say to Beldon *we'll miss you*, since, in a way, it will be gone and still here at the same time. [See for yourself](#).

[--Bruce Trachtenberg](#)