

The Art Of Participation:

Shared Lessons In Audience Engagement



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A Report on the Efforts of 22 Boston Area
Arts Organizations to Increase Participation in the Arts
Over the Course of Four Years 2006-2010

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The Massachusetts Cultural Council



Letter from the Boston Foundation

Successful cultural organizations stem from strong audiences. That has been one of our key findings at the Boston Foundation in our work to help the city's nonprofit arts and culture sector achieve financial health and maintain strong leadership. It is perhaps obvious that a broad and engaged audience helps to ensure a base of financial support through earned income. But audience members also play a more integral role: By committing their time and attention, they encourage organizations to innovate and grow artistically.

Given that audience members are such a strong force in the cultural dynamic, we are grateful that the Wallace Foundation selected Boston as a partner in its national efforts to increase public participation in the arts. Twenty-two local cultural organizations put Wallace support to use in developing a wide range of strategies and ideas to deepen their relationships with existing audience members and to reach out to potential new constituencies.

We were also delighted to join with the Massachusetts Cultural Council to convene these organizations into a working group that we called the Participation Learning Network (PLN). Even in an economic environment that might logically have encouraged administrators to guard their best ideas, the PLN members were able to make common cause around organizational viability linked to public engagement.

In fact, we observed a real desire to communicate among the PLN peers—a desire that was not limited to arts and culture professionals. As the program progressed, it also became clear that the arts feed a collective hunger for connection in the public at large. During the course of this four-year initiative, we were able to take important steps in strengthening the sense of belonging between individuals and arts organizations. PLN members were able to develop new means of reaching out to audience members in more targeted and sophisticated ways. They were able to more fully explore the potential of new electronic media for communication and education.

It was an interesting time to tackle this subject: As new forms of social media were evolving, so were the possibilities they offered for the nonprofit sector, providing hot topics for discussion. Sometimes, however, PLN members confirmed that tried-and-true methods have not lost their potency. While some audience members are eager to chime in on a lively blog or re-tweet an observational snippet, others are drawn by the opportunity to interact with an artist. And some, of course, crave both.

We have learned that there is no limit to the possibilities when arts leaders are given the opportunity to put their best ideas into practice. The PLN initiative encouraged organizations to test new ideas by focusing on specific projects, but we are heartened to see that these focused lessons have also reverberated throughout the participating organizations. The experience of the PLN has permitted the emergence of a collective wisdom that we are confident will continue to resonate across the arts and culture sector long after the conclusion of the formal funding period.

Sincerely,

Paul S. Grogan
President and CEO
The Boston Foundation

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Letter from the Massachusetts Cultural Council

All of us at the Massachusetts Cultural Council are proud that the Wallace Foundation chose Boston as one of the first two cities to participate in its Excellence Awards initiative. We want to thank the New York-based foundation for this ringing endorsement of our local cultural organizations. Ultimately, the Excellence Awards initiative joined Boston to San Francisco, Philadelphia, Chicago, Seattle, and Minneapolis-St. Paul for a meaningful and timely dialogue about increasing public engagement in the arts.

We were also thrilled to join with our colleagues at the Boston Foundation to create a Participation Learning Network—a safe and inspiring forum for the 22 funded organizations to share their best ideas, successes, and failures in expanding and enhancing cultural participation.

Just as we have found that funders can amplify their impact by sharing resources, we know that cultural organizations can increase their effectiveness—and perhaps avoid costly missteps—by learning from their peers. From the outset, an important objective of our work has been to develop a “knowledge portfolio” of successful practices from which other organizations can draw inspiration and formulate concrete plans to bring more people to their programs.

As arts organizations face the challenges of declining income and rising competition from new forms of entertainment, it is imperative that we unite in support of our common mission to make the arts a more vital part of people’s lives. We are grateful for the enthusiasm with which Boston organizations embraced this initiative and gratified by the level of honest conversation that was a hallmark—and highlight—of the PLN experience. We found organizations willing to share what worked, as well as what did not, and quick to offer suggestions when a peer’s project stalled or veered off in the wrong direction.

This publication is part of our effort to spread the word about what we have learned and accomplished in the last four years. In addition to summarizing the salient details of each project, it also outlines the process of building and maintaining the learning network and acknowledges the intriguing cultural thinkers who shared their ideas with us.

We hope that readers will benefit from our efforts and discoveries in increasing cultural participation and will take away some of the energy that was generated when creative and talented people join together to share experiences, brainstorm solutions to common problems, and build a broader and more inclusive cultural experience at large.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Anita Walker', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Anita Walker

Executive Director

Massachusetts Cultural Council

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Building Community to Achieve a Common Goal

In 2006, Boston became one of the first two cities selected for the Wallace Foundation's Excellence Awards initiative. Thus began a four-year collaboration among the Wallace Foundation, the Boston Foundation, and the Massachusetts Cultural Council to increase public participation in the arts. The three agencies set out to support Greater Boston-based cultural organizations that, in the words of Wallace Foundation President M. Christine DeVita, "have made a commitment to engage more people deeply in the arts part of their DNA."

The program recognized organizations that were already innovators in the field and provided funding and a support network to assist them in stretching even further as they carried on what the Wallace Foundation calls "the vital work of bringing the powerful benefit of the arts to all."

Although the three funding agencies have different purviews—national, community-wide, and state-wide—they share a common goal of making the arts more integral to people's lives. But the initiative was not limited to broadening and deepening cultural participation. At the same time, the funders sought to shine a national spotlight on the critical need to engage more people in the arts and to draw lessons from the experience in Boston (and other cities supported by Wallace) that might guide and encourage other cultural organizations across the country.

[T]he three funding agencies ... share a common goal of making the arts more integral to people's lives.

"We wanted to work with organizations that were ready to take on a growing edge and to embrace the challenge of increasing participation as part of a larger strategy," says Ann McQueen, former Senior Program Officer for the Boston Foundation. "To be truly successful, audience development must cut to the core of an organization's mission, rather than just be a strategy of the marketing department," concurs Charlie McDermott, Deputy Director of the Massachusetts Cultural Council.

Ultimately, the initiative involved 22 Greater Boston-based organizations, including seven direct Wallace grantees and a local cohort of 15 organizations that were regranted funds from a Wallace Foundation grant to the Boston Foundation. (See Participants, page 95.)

Beyond providing financial support, the initiative facilitated an exchange of knowledge by creating a Participation Learning Network (PLN). Based on the model of a community of practice, the PLN brought together organizations with shared interests and similar challenges to learn from each other over an extended period of time. Public forums, directors' sessions, workshops, and special-interest salons provided the framework for an ongoing exchange of ideas. As organizations implemented their individual plans, they also contributed to the larger community. For continuity, each organization was asked to identify two key staff members who would attend PLN meetings on a regular basis.

With staff already stretched thin, some organizations had reservations about the time commitment that the PLN could require. William Chapman, Director of Marketing and Development for Opera Boston, admits that he initially feared that the PLN would be incredibly time consuming, but that the presenters and funders “created the conditions for a good and useful dialogue.” He found that participating in the PLN “helps put an end to the isolation” of the daily routine and provides an ongoing structure “to figure out what your peers are doing.”

PLN speakers and activities were chosen to mix equal parts of inspiration and information while carving out time to engage in hands-on work. Presentations were loosely structured around a theme of adaptive change that became ever more relevant as each organization sought to further its audience-building efforts in a climate of increasing financial uncertainty.

Two public forums each year were open to artists, cultural organizations, and PLN members. Noted speakers, whose presentations are summarized throughout this publication, generally brought a national perspective and an inspirational message. Early in the course of the initiative, for example, Dr. Lynne Conner, Colby College faculty member and Principal Investigator for the Heinz Endowments’ Arts Experience Initiative, shared innovative approaches by organizations across the country that empower audience members to find their own meaning in cultural events.

Later in the process, Ben Cameron, Program Director for the Arts at the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, called for organizational change in response to new circumstances. His presentation provided a jolt of energy and a modicum of reassurance, even as some participants faced

PLN speakers and activities were chosen to mix equal parts of inspiration and information while carving out time to engage in hands-on work.

roadblocks to implementation of their funded projects. At the final public forum, Diane Paulus, Artistic Director/CEO of the American Repertory Theater, and Elizabeth Streb, founder of STREB Extreme Action Company and STREB Lab for Action Mechanics, engaged in a lively conversation about building an audience for challenging, even risk-taking work.

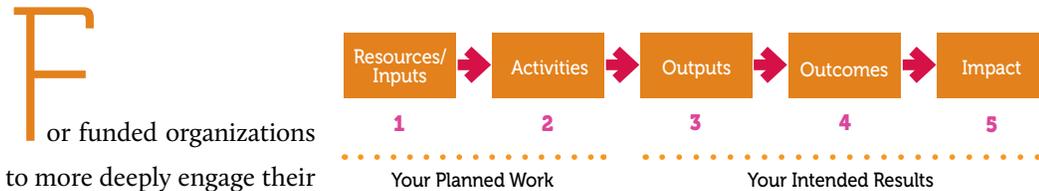
Several meetings were designed specifically for artistic and executive directors, the individuals who would lead their organizations in new ways of thinking as well as new methodologies. But the heavy lifting of the PLN resided in the four workshops per year in which participants developed their original plans and reported on their progress.

“I felt empowered and energized. My battery was recharged,” says Gia Podobinski, Marketing and Public Relations Manager of New Repertory Theatre. “You get so caught up in the day-to-day operations, but then the PLN meetings let you get a more clear sense of strategy. This is why I’m in the arts.”

Although the formal Participation Learning Network will not continue beyond the funding period, there are encouraging signs that the spirit of the network will persist. Members of the cultural community have grown to value engagement in long-term dialogue with their peers. During the course of the initiative, interest from the PLN members led to the launch of special-interest salons that address a narrow topic, such as the best use of social networking sites or web-based marketing.

“Sometimes the smaller organizations have the best ideas,” says Kim Noltemy, Director of Sales, Marketing and Communications for the Boston Symphony Orchestra. “And they are usually able to act on them quickly.”

Program Planning and Evaluation Using the Logic Model



For funded organizations to more deeply engage their patrons, the challenge was clear: Develop programs that would both reach more people and would enable them to experience a more profound connection to the arts. But transforming good intentions into solid programs is not always easy. To facilitate clear thinking about program goals and the correlating action steps, many of the organizations in the Participation Learning Network were asked to adopt the logic model for program development and evaluation.

The logic model was first formulated in the department of public administration at the University of Southern California in the 1970s to enhance performance and accountability of public and nonprofit organizations. The Kellogg Foundation promoted wider use of the logic model in the late 1980s and early 1990s, reasoning, “Clear ideas about what you plan to do and why—as well as an organized approach to capturing, documenting and disseminating program results—enhance the case for investment in your program.”

A detailed Logic Model Development Guide is available on the Kellogg Foundation’s web site, www.wkkf.org. “The process of developing the model is an opportunity to chart the course,” write the Kellogg program staff. “It is a conscious process that creates an explicit understanding of the challenges ahead, the resources avail-

able, and the timetable in which to hit the target.”

At the Massachusetts Cultural Council (MCC), applications to the YouthReach funding program are built on the logic model approach. “It leads to intentional programming,” says H. Mark Smith, the MCC YouthReach Program Manager and one of the main facilitators of the Participation Learning Network. “Groups start by identifying the change that they want to have happen and then determine the steps that it will require.”

Using the model as the basis of a grant application also emphasizes function over rhetoric. Says Smith, “The logic model helps groups focus on program plans and goals rather than on wording and narrative.”

As a first step, participants were asked to articulate a “theory of change” that summarizes how the organization will change as the result of the proposed program. The logic model itself is built on a table and flow-chart format. Columns delineate *inputs* (available resources), *activities* (actions needed for implementation), *outputs* (products, materials, and knowledge gained from the activities) and *outcomes* (the specific changes that have been achieved). Once an organization has completed the flow chart, its goals have been distilled into a graphic depiction of what the Kellogg Foundation describes as a “clear map of the road ahead.” (See sample, pages 11-12.)

“Groups start by identifying the change that they want to have happen and then determine the steps that it will require.”

– H. Mark Smith

That clarity enables staff members to conduct ongoing assessments as they implement their plans. Midway through the funding process, organizations were asked to evaluate their projected outputs and outcomes against their actual progress so they could make any necessary mid-course corrections.

“We asked organizations to focus on what they had learned, not on whether they had failed or succeeded,” Smith explains. This non-judgmental approach encouraged organizations to depart from the tried-and-true and to take risks in exploring new directions. “We encouraged organizations to be candid about their experiences and gave them a high degree of flexibility to learn from their mistakes and adjust their plans accordingly.”

Smith acknowledges, however, that participating organizations approached the logic model with skepticism. “It’s very disciplined,” he says. “At first it felt like yet another grant-seeking exercise as opposed to a program-planning tool.”

Elizabeth Taylor-Mead, Associate Director of the Coolidge Corner Theatre Foundation, admits that it took her some time to warm up to the logic model approach to planning. “But I could see that if you could get into it, it would be helpful,” she says. “Once we completed it, I thought, ‘Of course! Once you do one thing, it will make another thing happen.’”

John Beck, Director of Operations at ArtsBoston, also approached the task of creating the logic model with reluctance. “The first time we did it because we had to,” he says. “The second time we did it because it worked.”

“The first
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– John Beck

Kit Jenkins, Executive Director of Raw Art Works, notes, “Almost all the work on the grant was done in training sessions.” As part of the learning process, organizations met in small groups to discuss and critique each others’ preliminary logic models. As a result, each final plan was rooted in a broader perspective and informed by the experiences and expertise of peer organizations.

As a program-planning tool, the logic model promotes what the Kellogg Foundation calls “group process and shared understanding.” In addition, “other groups feel invested in our work because they can see that we followed their advice,” says ArtsBoston Executive Director Catherine Peterson.

ArtsBoston, in fact, internalized the process. “Before we launched the ArtsBoston.org web site (see page 25), we developed a logic model for all our constituencies and identified outcomes for up to three years out,” says Beck.

Peterson describes an all-inclusive process. “It was a total team effort and everybody has ownership,” she says. “Staff worked in teams to develop the logic model and we shared it with the board. Our entire organization wrapped its arms around moving forward in a systematic way. It’s a living document. I look at it weekly. John sleeps with it under his pillow.”

SAMPLE LOGIC MODEL WORKSHEET:

Strategic Enhancement of Bostix Jr.

Theory of change—

If ...

ArtsBoston grows its BosTix Jr. program by strategically partnering with existing networks and organizations serving parents and families, diversifying listings and adding new content, and aiding arts groups in learning from each others' best practices for growing family audiences...

Then...

BosTix Jr. can help more families and young people connect with Greater Boston's cultural organizations and attend/participate in the performing arts, fostering an early love of the arts among the next generation of arts-goers.

Program and Purpose:

ArtsBoston launched the BosTix Jr. program in Fall 2005 to build a bridge between arts groups and the parents/caregivers of kids and teens. Pre-launch research revealed that these audiences would be interested in bringing young people to performing arts events but that they lacked information, felt the experience would be unaffordable, or both. BosTix Jr. customizes ArtsBoston's successful all-audiences BosTix Advance program for this targeted audience. Its website (www.BosTix Jr.org) spotlights youth-appropriate programming and half-price ticket offers. It specially enhances those listings in partnership with ArtsBoston's 160+ arts member groups by adding the in-depth information adults need to make entertainment decisions for their families, from age recommendations to show content to logistics. Interest is strong. The email list is growing: over 7,200 people now subscribe to the free weekly BosTix Jr. Update, a third more than last year. Promotion is consistent: Each week, the Greater Media radio stations showcase upcoming shows on air in the "BosTix Jr. Family Night Out Guide." And the benefit to both families and arts groups is clear: last season, BosTix Jr. sold 8,000 half-price tickets to over 250 events presented by 75 different arts groups, nearly half of ArtsBoston's membership.

In this role as a "cultural catalyst," ArtsBoston sees how to bring BosTix Jr. to its full potential. Our goal is threefold: to enhance BosTix Jr.'s content; to raise awareness of the program among parents/caregivers; and to strengthen the capacity of arts groups wishing to welcome families and younger audiences. This will include:

- Expanding content: adding regular-price as well as half-price ticket information; adding listings for low-cost and free child-appropriate performances; providing service information for this convenience-oriented audience, such as family friendly restaurants near each venue and more detailed transportation/parking information;
- Establishing strategic partnerships to ensure that program information reaches target audiences most effectively, including: libraries; PTAs; youth arts program providers; community-service organizations; family technology centers;
- Creating program awareness online and in print to bring these partnerships to life by developing: direct mail aimed at local families; a rack-card for tourists; weekly updates for tourism partners; a redesign of the weekly email BosTix Jr. Update; media outreach; and web and search engine advertising.
- Building capacity, expertise and participation among member arts groups by: creating a forum for sharing best practices in marketing to and serving family audiences; exploring cooperative advertising and cross-promotions possibilities; increasing awareness among ArtsBoston's member groups of the benefits of promoting appropriate shows to families.

SAMPLE: ArtsBoston Logic Model

Inputs Resources “put in” (staff time, money, space, relationships...)	Activities, Services Resources “put in” (staff time, money, space, relationships...)	Outputs Units of service your program produces, or “puts out”—number of lectures/demonstrations, phone calls, guides...	Outcomes Intended change in knowledge, skills, attitude, or behavior
<p> \$\$ from Wallace Staff time: • Advance Ticketing Manager (oversees BT Jr.) • Director of Operations (serves as technical manager) • Member Service Coordinator (liaises with member groups and potential community partners) • Director of Ticketing and Tourism (manages tourism sector relationships) Consultant time: • Research • Evaluation • PR Collateral Materials cost (graphic design, printing, postage) Advertising (web and search engine) Website and email newsletter redesign cost New relationships with family organizations and building connection network Member Group Expertise and Support </p>	<p> Marketing to Locals: Sponsor focus groups with target constituency (incl. parents, caregivers, and youth arts program providers) to identify best practices for outreach to locals Encourage AB member groups to participate in BT Jr by including benefits in AB membership information, AB monthly newsletter and AB new member orientation Reach out to arts groups, even outside AB’s membership, presenting low-cost or free family events (and create an appropriate membership level/vehicle to engage them in AB into the future) Redesign BTJR website and emails with expanded information including family friendly restaurants, parking and full-price in addition to half-price ticket purchase Research family organizations, particularly social service agencies serving urban constituencies and identify at least five for partnerships Identify and cultivate 40 local and 10 visitor family-related email listservs/websites for BT JR information placement Create incentive for signing up to increase mailing list Design direct mail piece to locals promoting redesigned website and emails Conduct workshops bringing together AB members to share and discover best practices in marketing and presenting the arts to families Marketing to Tourists: Sponsor focus groups for visitor industry (concierges, front line GBC/IB/MOTT staff, etc.) to identify best practices for outreach to tourists Reach out to networks of hospitality & service industries in order to build information/links to restaurants and other businesses that enhance the arts experience Design flyer for tourist outlets Develop weekly “What’s Happening” PDF that can be printed by concierges and frontline tourism staff Monitor feedback from tourism partners with quarterly meetings Monitor BosTix Jr. statistics on monthly basis to track program growth Survey members after six months and modify work based on feedback Report successes and statistics to members </p>	<p> Four focus groups held One member workshop held, with a followup summary of capacity-building learnings to all arts member groups 20,000 piece mailing to coincide with website re-launch; press release and promotional push with media partners 10,000 piece distribution to tourists through visitor centers and hotels New website landing page and deeper content for other pages 52 redesigned BT JR. weekly email updates per year to locals Ongoing PR around specific initiatives (school vacation weeks, summer vacation, etc.) 52 PDF “What’s Happening” created for tourism professionals per year BT Jr listing on 50 listservs/websites 12 weeks of online ads on ten family/parent websites Eight months of Google Ad words to drive traffic Understanding of member satisfaction based on six month survey ArtsBoston e-newsletter with success report to members </p>	<p> 2, 500 more people keeping updated on family-appropriate shows each week by subscribing to the BosTix Jr. Update 15% more visitors exploring the arts through the BosTix Jr.org website 10% more people buying tickets for BosTixJr-listed shows More arts groups crediting BosTixJr for total sales and regular-price sales, in addition to half-price sales Tourism partners more deeply engaged in promoting Boston arts events Ongoing relationships built with outside agencies and institutions (libraries, etc) </p>

Targeted Audience Outreach Efforts

Nearly a third of Participation Learning Network members addressed the challenge of expanding engagement with specific audience segments. They reached out to families, teens, young professionals, ethnic communities, and even casual cultural consumers. They tested strategies as diverse as viral marketing, web-based resource building, social networking, and “guerrilla interpretation.”



Night Moves

Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum courts key demographic

“We can do something fun and cool and edgy that will tie in to the legacy and mission of the museum. It was a huge lesson for all of us.”

– Katherine
Armstrong Layton

More than 80 years after her death, art collector and museum founder Isabella Stewart Gardner remains one of the most storied hostesses in Boston history. When museum staff set out to attract younger visitors, they needed to look no further than Mrs. Gardner herself for inspiration in shaping a program that would bring her museum to life through socializing and artistic discovery.

“We had wanted to introduce evening hours for years, but we didn’t have the budget for it,” says Julie Crites, the Gardner Museum’s Director of Program Planning. “The Wallace grant allowed us to be open during a time that working people and younger audiences could come.”

Like many organizations, the Gardner was particularly keen on attracting visitors in the 18- to 34-year-old demographic — the ticket-buyers and donors of the future. To dispel any notions of the museum as frozen in time, staff conceived a monthly evening event in tune with contemporary sensibilities and destined to become a staple among young Bostonians. Responsibility for the program was delegated to the staff members who best knew the target audience.

“A young team was given the authority to create this program,” says Kirsten Bridier, Institutional Support Officer. “It legitimized and encouraged younger museum professionals.”

Jenn DePrizio, Director of Visual Learning, concurs. “Most of us who planned the program were like the audience we want to cultivate,” she says. “We drew on our experiences of other successful events.”

As the project was moving forward, the museum also conducted a baseline survey to create a clearer picture of its current audience. “We really learned the value of research to correct misperceptions,” says DePrizio. When the studies revealed that 39 percent of the daytime audience is between the ages of 18 and 34, “we almost fell off our seats,” she says. “We were already welcoming our target age group, but just not locals and just not with programming designed to their interests.”

Billed as “a new kind of night out,” *Gardner After Hours* launched in September 2007 and attracted slightly more than 600 visitors. Now firmly established on the third Thursday of every month, the event usually draws a capacity crowd of approximately 700, about half of whom are first-time visitors. Moreover, 73 percent of the attendees are in the target demographic, primarily in the most desirable 25- to 34-year-old age range. Each month, between eight and ten attendees purchase a museum membership.



The basics of each evening follow the same pattern. Short “Viewfinder” presentations that focus on John Singer Sargent’s portrait of Mrs. Gardner are supplemented by other gallery talks and impromptu lectures. Guests are encouraged to take self-guided tours, sketch in the galleries, listen to live music, enjoy specialty cocktails and snacks at the Courtside Bar, or dine at the Gardner Café. On selected evenings, optional add-ons (at additional price) include new music concerts.

Even with a successful format, says Crites, “it’s a lot more work than you expect. It requires a lot of care and feeding. *After Hours* has been about 25 percent of my job.” Each evening revolves around a specific theme and features the museum’s five program cornerstones: music, historic art, contemporary art, education, and landscape.

This commitment to creating a social event with strong links to the museum’s mission has promoted cross-departmental cooperation. Working with the contemporary department on music performances “gave us the opportunity to present challenging and provocative work alongside purely entertaining presentations from DJs and musicians,” says Crites.

Education and conservation staff have also stepped forward to give *After Hours* gallery talks. “The Viewfinder talks have been so successful,” says DePrizio, “that we have started training volunteers to do those sorts of talks during the day.”

The Gardner did not rely solely on attendance figures to gauge the success of *After Hours*. Exit surveys were administered as program evaluation tools and Randi Korn & Associates were commissioned to study attendees. The study

is available at www.randikorn.com/resources/young_adults.php.

“The research confirmed that we shouldn’t ‘dumb down’ for this audience,” says Public Relations Director Katherine Armstrong Layton.

“People said that they wanted to learn, but didn’t want to feel as if they were in school,” says DePrizio. “Our short, conversational, non-academic approach still has a lot of content.”

As staff expected, the experience of socializing in Mrs. Gardner’s unique and still highly personal museum inspired by a Venetian palazzo was a highlight for many attendees. “People said that being here at night must be what it was like when Isabella Stewart Gardner gave her parties,” says DePrizio.

While daytime visitors are sometimes troubled by low light or lack of interpretive labels, *After Hours* visitors “loved the atmosphere,” says Crites. “They reported that it felt like a domestic setting where they could experience art on their own terms.”

In a June 2007 presentation (see page 62), Alan Brown, a principal at the WolfBrown consulting firm, had stressed to PLN members that “what you are selling is not an artist, a work of art, or an exhibition. You are selling imagination, renewal, better relationships.”

Responses from Gardner *After Hours* attendees seemed to confirm Brown’s approach to “value-based” marketing. “They said that they wanted to have meaningful conversations with their friends,” says DePrizio. “They felt as if they were out of their normal environment and could have meaningful experiences.”

Some evening visitors also reported that they wanted to meet new people. To promote interaction, staff introduced gallery games. “In general,” says Crites, “we hit it pretty spot on



PHOTO BY JUSTIN KNIGHT

by offering a continuum of experiences. The changes we made were mostly logistical.”

In fact, more than 82 percent of *After Hours* attendees indicated that they would recommend the museum to their friends, as opposed to 59 percent of regular visitors. “They said that they found the experience emotionally fulfilling,” says DePrizio, noting that staff would like to do more research on this point to help cultivate audiences for the museum as a whole.

Layton, the Public Relations Director, admits to being “pleasantly surprised, but not shocked” by the success of *After Hours*. “Before we launched the program, the perception was that the Gardner was stodgy and never changed,” she acknowledges. “*After Hours* clarified the museum for this audience. It created a vehicle to entice people to come and see for themselves and realize that their perception was not accurate.”

The success of *After Hours* had an impact on the museum as well as on the public. “It was an eye-opener for leadership,” says Layton. “We can do something fun and cool and edgy that will tie in to the legacy and mission of the museum. It was a huge lesson for all of us.”

Crites agrees. “It’s a good model of where marketing and programming came together in lock-step,” she says. “All cultural organizations need to be better at this.”

To successfully introduce *After Hours* to the public, Layton notes that it was essential to think strategically from the beginning. “You never have a second chance to launch,” she says. “With Wallace support we did a lot of marketing and branding that first year that has sustained us and will continue to.”

Developing a strong graphic identity that resonates with the target audience was central to the effort. With *After Hours* events at capacity, Layton says “we are in the mode of maintaining awareness and have been able to decrease our monetary outlay.” Outreach efforts are focused on social networking, nightlife and entertainment tabloids, and the museum’s own web site (www.gardnermuseum.org).

Although the members of the target audience tend to be heavy users of social media and the Internet, the museum’s first-ever blog, posted on the *After Hours* page on the web site, did not generate a lot of interest and was discontinued for lack of adequate staff time to keep it fresh and relevant.

Nonetheless, staff expect that the Gardner’s more interactive and dynamic web site, developed with support from the Wallace Foundation and launched in the summer of 2010, will be a valuable tool for sustaining the momentum of *After Hours*. “Web site visitors will be able to have an online glimpse of what *After Hours*, or other programs, will be like,” says DePrizio.

At the end of the grant period, a project that had been on the back burner for a number of years was firmly established as an important component of the Gardner’s public identity. “*After Hours* is now a core program of our operating budget,” says Institutional Support Officer Bridier, noting that two corporations and one foundation have stepped forward as sponsors. “It’s very established with good results and we can continue to raise funds.”

But reflecting on the success of *After Hours*, Bridier notes that “it’s not a one-size-fits-all program for all organizations. Every organization has to find a mission-based approach.”

DePrizio agrees. “Any program has to reflect who you are as an institution,” she says.



PHOTO BY CONNOR GLEASON

Live and In Person

The Theater Offensive opts for personal, social outreach to audience segments



AARON EPSTEIN

The Theater Offensive (TTO) was founded in 1989 to “present the diverse realities of queer lives in art so bold it breaks through personal isolation and political orthodoxy to help build an honest, progressive community.”

Despite this inclusive goal, by the start of the Participation Learning Network (PLN) grant period staff had begun to suspect that “our community is splintering and also congregating in ways that are different from how you traditionally organize people,” says former Community Engagement Manager Eugene Tan. Reaching

these smaller and more focused groups would call for a departure from traditional marketing strategies.

To identify “segments” of individuals who might be drawn to their programs, TTO staff posed the same questions that they ask when developing work for the stage. “When we consider a show, we ask about its audience,” says Tan. “Who do we know who would come to this? What would get her here?”

Using this approach, “it became clear that demographics and psychographics were insufficient,” explains Tan. “We wanted to understand commonalities that were based on interests rather than on location, gender, age, or race.”

Ultimately, TTO decided to target several segments, including middle-class middle-aged gay men who have moved out of the traditionally gay neighborhood of Boston’s South End, straight families committed to exposing their children to a diverse range of people, young activists sympathetic to the Gay-Straight Alliance, and straight women who enjoy the company of gay men.

“If we could get them in and show them a good time, we knew we would generate some return,” says Tan. While many organizations are expanding electronic outreach, Tan reasoned that TTO’s targeted groups would respond best to a more personal approach.

“We know that word of mouth works,” he says. “We also know that it’s hard to get. We asked ourselves, what can we do to generate word of mouth?”

The answer was to create “cruising crews” of people who represent a target audience and might serve as opinion leaders. Crew members helped TTO staff identify programs of potential interest to their peers and conducted outreach in person, often at community meetings, house parties, and club nights where they could talk up an upcoming performance and hand out palm cards. In addition, crew members were expected to greet audience members at the theater to create a sense of welcome in what might be an unfamiliar environment.

Such a one-on-one approach hinged on finding the right individuals to become the public faces of the Theater Offensive. “We went after people who lived their identities in ways that were approachable,” says Tan. “We were asking cruising crew members to personally engage with people. It’s hard to teach someone to do it effectively.”

Even though crew members were paid, there was a significant level of attrition during each of the two phases of the project — a third in the first phase, 40 percent in the second. Conducting outreach work in what had previously been a purely social environment proved more difficult than some members anticipated. Others were uncomfortable as hosts during pre-show activities. Moreover, TTO realized that peer outreach might not be effective for all of their target

segments. Single women, for example, might respond more strongly to outreach by a gay man than to outreach by another woman.

Despite these difficulties, the effort appeared to generate results. Anecdotal evidence suggested that a large number of audience members represented the targeted segments, though TTO was unable to develop effective tools to fully evaluate their audiences.

During just one year, however, TTO was able to identify almost 100 audience members who had responded to direct outreach from a cruising crew member. During that same year, TTO gathered contact information from about 700 audience members, including 20 percent who were not already in the database. “I wish we could have captured more names so that we could quantify who had come,” admits Tan.

As the PLN grant period was concluding, the Theater Offensive re-evaluated its strategic vision and decided to switch emphasis from theatrical productions to creating neighborhood-based partnerships for developing and presenting work. Although the cruising crew model may not fit this new, more geographic focus, Tan feels that some of the lessons from the experience can guide future outreach efforts.

Of the cruising crew, Tan says “It’s very time-consuming and it’s not free.” Success depends on finding individuals who are both effective and genuine in building enthusiasm for an event. And although much of the work takes place in social environments, it is essential that crew members recognize that it is a serious undertaking that requires a firm time commitment.

The broader lesson, however, is that it is essential to have the proper tools in place to evaluate results and follow-through on cultivating first-time audience members. “This doesn’t replace traditional marketing,” says Tan.

“We know
word of
mouth works.
We also know
that it’s hard
to get.”

– Eugene Tan

From Data to Dance Floor

José Mateo Ballet Theatre hones database and embraces wide world



“Our project started as a technical solution,” says Scott Fraser, Managing Director of the José Mateo Ballet Theatre (JMBT). Referring to enhancements to the company’s software to support rudimentary data mining and network mapping, Fraser says, “the Participation Learning Network [PLN] allowed us to look at one facet of our organization — the marketing — and align it with our core values and with our overarching goal of community engagement.”

The company takes a variety of steps to increase participation, including building relationships with social service agencies such as Centro Presente, which serves Latin American immigrants, and Adbar, an Ethiopian Women’s Alliance.

“The challenge is to track diverse audiences and understand that the gateways to participation are different in different communities,” says Fraser. With PLN support, the company put new database technology into place to identify and work with its growing grassroots network of organizations and individuals.

“We wanted to see where our community partners intersect,” says Fraser. “Who are the people who are active in a number of communities and who can motivate their constituents? How can we reach out to them?”

When organizations collaborate with JMBT or use the performance or rehearsal space at the Old Cambridge Baptist Church in Harvard Square, the company is able to collect names for its database. But getting clean information from partner organizations proved harder than anticipated, and even the company’s own data required rigorous standardization.

For example, staff realized that they were unwittingly creating separate files for different members of the same household. As a further refinement, household maps were developed to identify spouses, children, and others living at the same address. Now primary records incorporate all household members. By identifying these households, as well as individuals who appear on multiple lists, JMBT expects to more effectively target direct mail recipients and evaluate the success of audience outreach strategies. “We hope to understand where our audiences are coming from — both geographically, and to a lesser extent, in terms of their motivation,” says Fraser.

The detail-oriented project furthers the company's larger vision. "Our new strategic plan calls on us to make access to our programs more equitable," says Fraser. "How to diversify is a real question for us. Our work strives to be culturally inclusive. We have gateway programs in place, our school is diverse, and the company is becoming more diverse. Diversity of audience is the biggest obstacle."

Fraser acknowledges that ballet is often perceived as an elite art form. "One of our overarching goals is to create relevancy for art, especially ballet," he says. The company is discussing ways to increase diversity and inclusion with Opera Boston (see page 58), a fellow PLN participant that also is taking steps to dispel an image of exclusivity.

"Barriers to cross-cultural participation are really profound," says Fraser. The company realized that refined data mapping and mining methods alone would not enable them to cultivate the diverse audience they are seeking. "We don't understand all the barriers. But dance is not language-based. You can have profound communication and shared community experiences where barriers fall apart."

To build on the unifying power of dance, JMBT devoted the second phase of PLN funding to launching an annual Dance for World Community festival in Cambridge. The company not only views the festival as a celebration of the art form, but also as a valuable opportunity to engage more agencies and individuals who reflect the diversity of Greater Boston.

The initial event in June 2009 drew about 15,000 people, 25 social service agencies, and 39 dance groups representing a variety of cultural traditions. "I was shocked by the depth and quality of the artistry existing in our community," Fraser says. "During the big block party, a post hip hop group did a dance face-off with a classical Indian dance troupe."

By 2010, the festival had grown to 50 social service agencies and 50 dance groups. "Every continent except Australia was represented," Fraser says. The company also hosted a forum on expanding the role of dance in the community.

JMBT plans to continue the Dance for World Community festival as an annual event. It also has added a new staff position to oversee the gateway programs and make the best use of the database to facilitate outreach and networking.

"Civic engagement is our overarching goal," Fraser says. "Our city's demographic is rapidly changing. Building and diversifying our audience is our strategic focus for the next five years."



"The challenge is to track diverse audiences and understand that the gateways to participation are different in different communities."

– Scott Fraser

Race, Class and Cultural Participation

The framework for the June 26, 2008 panel discussion on Race, Class and Cultural Participation was established by Catherine Fukushima, then representing the Wallace Foundation. “What’s important from this effort,” she told the assembled cultural leaders, “is learning to reach out to people who may be different from those that you’re used to dealing with. We’re all going to learn and grow together.”

The discussion was certainly timely according to panel member Sam Yoon, former at-large member of the Boston City Council. “As of the 2000 census,” he said, “Boston is a majority minority city. It’s a demographic fact that the future of our city and our region is going to be very different from our present and our past.”

The 2000 census of Boston found that 25 percent of households are foreign-born and 30 percent speak a language other than English at home. Yoon anticipated that the 2010 census would reveal even greater diversity. “We know this is a trend,” he said. “We can either anticipate it and prepare for it or we can wait. I think cultural organizations should be ahead of the trend” in looking at the variety of people who might attend their programs or become members.

“Diversifying participation means creating relationships — not events.”

– José Massó

Panelist Shirley Carrington, then interim Executive Director of Boston Connects, reflected on several decades of experience creating programs to promote economic self-sufficiency in diverse neighborhoods. “An organization must have the ability to work with community groups to develop visions and strategies for change based on the community’s perspective,” she said. “The most exciting and challenging aspect of community engagement is that it is a continuous, fluctuating process.”

Audience members and panelists alike acknowledged that the path to greater cultural participation is not just about throwing open the doors — it is also about creating the welcoming environment that makes people want to come in.

“A lot of organizations forget that along with educating communities of color about how to appreciate a particular art form,” says Javier Torres, Director of Villa Victoria Center for the Arts, “we must also educate the current audiences to welcome new communities.”

Panel moderator José Massó produces *Con Salsa!* for WBUR public radio. “When we think of an event, we should not just think about booking, advertising, and selling the tickets,” he said. “Diversifying participation means creating relationships — not events.”

The panel discussion is available on the WGBH Forum Network web site, <http://forum-network.org/>.



Building Blocks

Boston Children's Chorus lays groundwork for audience outreach

"It's easy for us to fill our audience with the family members of our performers," says David Howse, Executive Director of the Boston Children's Chorus (BCC). "But we want to reach out to other people who are passionate about music."

Since its founding in 2003, the BCC has offered choral training to youth aged 7 to 18 and has encouraged them to celebrate their new-found voices through performance. But BCC's mission goes beyond nurturing artistic talent. With a chorus that reflects the city's racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic diversity, the organization aims to serve as a catalyst to unite diverse communities and inspire social change.

"...We want to reach out to other people who are passionate about music."

– David Howse

“... We have learned that we have to constantly think about marketing and how to engage and motivate the audience.”

– David Howse

“To fulfill our mission, we have to expand our impact beyond our families,” says Howse. “We need to get more people to see the transformative power of youth singing together.”

With support from the Participation Learning Network (PLN), the BCC crafted a multi-faceted outreach plan. A public relations and media consultant helped the organization sharpen its focus on the nuts and bolts of marketing, such as preparing calendar listings and press releases, and urged BCC to develop more compelling human interest stories that might generate feature coverage in print publications as well as on radio and television.

The chorus often performs for organizations as diverse as the Boston Red Sox, Blue Cross Blue Shield, and Back Bay Financial and has built close partnerships with other arts organizations, including Opera Boston. “We are able to put our kids in front of audiences that might not come to one of our concerts,” says Howse, noting that he is working to enlist these organizations in promoting upcoming BCC concerts to their constituents.

“People are moved and inspired by what they see on stage,” says Howse. “They expect the kids to be cute, but they don’t expect them to be good. If we can get people into the seats, that’s half the battle.”

During the PLN grant period, few of BCC’s self-produced concerts were ticketed, making it difficult for the organization to gather audience demographic information to assess the impact of engagement efforts. Although the company is determined not to limit access for low-income audience members, Howse notes that “we are becoming a valued asset that people are willing to pay for.” BCC plans to begin charging a modest admission for three of its six self-produced concerts. The company also plans to initiate online ticket sales, which should make it possible to gather basic demographic data about audience members and to build the number of subscribers to the BCC e-newsletter.

“We know audiences are growing,” Howse says, “but we have learned that we have to constantly think about marketing and how to engage and motivate the audience.”

Moreover, Howse notes, discussions at the PLN meetings helped him realize that audience development doesn’t stop at the concert hall door. “We learned a lot about making a welcoming space from the presentations by the Harvard Art Museums (see page 75) and from speakers Chip Conley (see page 70) and Ben Cameron (see page 84).”

Noting that his organization is still relatively young, Howse says that the PLN meetings were a “safe place to throw out and embrace crazy ideas. I never left without a new idea that I wanted to implement.”

Generational Changes

ArtsBoston opens the performance doors to children and families

"Sharing an arts experience with kids is a real joy," says Catherine Peterson, Executive Director of ArtsBoston.

Since its founding in 1975, the service organization has sold performing arts tickets to more than 3 million people through its BosTix half-price programs (online at www.BosTix.org and at booths at Faneuil Hall and Copley Square) and other marketing initiatives, and has generated more than \$45 million in earned income for its member arts organizations. The BosTix discount ticket programs neatly fulfill ArtsBoston's dual mission. They assist organizations with marketing and audience development while at the same time providing easy access and affordable prices to Greater Boston residents so that the arts can become an integral part of their lives.

Reasoning that it's never too early for arts exposure, ArtsBoston launched BosTix Jr. in 2005 as a family-oriented spin-off to its already successful ticket operation. On joining the Participation Learning Network, ArtsBoston chose to focus its PLN grants on strengthening its family-focused programs and outreach.

The BosTix Jr. web site (www.BosTixJr.org) offers parents and other caregivers convenient one-stop shopping for half-price advance tickets to performing arts events presented by ArtsBoston member companies. "Surveys showed us that parents were looking for easy ways to go to



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the arts, but that it was hard to find convenient and affordable options, especially at the last minute," says Peterson.

Other feedback from the target audience for BosTix Jr. was more surprising for an organization that has focused largely on discount tickets as a way to build audiences. The surveys revealed that price was not the sole factor in limiting families' participation in the arts. "We've seen a shift in the last couple of years," Peterson acknowledges. "Lack of accurate and accessible information was as great a barrier to participation as price."

To address this information gap, BosTix Jr. listings may also include recommended ages and details on content. The bottom line is to let parents know what to expect before they purchase tickets. In addition, an online guide, "Tips for Kids at Shows," combined with more practical advice on venues, transportation options, and other logistical details help to ensure a successful family night out.

“Lack of accurate and accessible information was as great a barrier to participation as price.”

– Catherine Peterson

“We had been so focused on ticketing that getting into this realm of information and knowledge was a big step forward for us,” says Director of Operations John Beck.

During the first year of PLN funding, ArtsBoston’s priority was to generate increased visibility and secure partnerships to help BosTix Jr. grow. With focused staff outreach, ArtsBoston was able to increase the number of shows offered on BosTix Jr. by 25 percent. At the same time, a 40 percent increase in the number of tickets sold resulted in a 50 percent increase in revenues for participating arts groups. Through customer relationship management software on its improved web site, ArtsBoston secured more than 2,500 new subscribers for weekly e-mail updates.

By the second round of funding, ArtsBoston took the success of BosTix Jr. as a mandate to expand its service to families. “We had taken care of the price barrier through half-price tickets,” says Beck. “We wanted to make the leap to becoming an even more comprehensive source of information about family-friendly programming.”

That meant opening the doors to organizations that were not ArtsBoston members to create an all-inclusive events calendar that families could rely on for a full rundown of free, full-price, and discounted programs offered by for profit and nonprofit organizations in all disciplines.

From the outset, members were enthusiastic about the increased visibility and audience development opportunities offered by BosTix Jr. But staff were mindful that expanding the listings would mean stepping outside their traditional role of developing programs that would directly benefit member organizations only. To gauge member response to the expanded list-

ings, ArtsBoston conducted six focus groups for its 170 members in the disciplines of theater, dance, music, visual arts, comedy, and film.

“Across the board, what we all cared about was creating a successful site,” says Beck. “We realized that we needed the most comprehensive site possible or people would not come back. It helps everyone if we have the most comprehensive events calendar.”

During the second round of PLN funding, ArtsBoston also took steps to more formally institutionalize its commitment to families. Rather than being positioned as an adjunct to the primary services, the new and improved calendar of family-friendly programming was fully integrated into ArtsBoston’s programs when a new web site (ArtsBoston.org) was launched in May 2009.

Described by ArtsBoston as “a comprehensive online arts and entertainment calendar for upcoming exhibits, performances, and concerts,” ArtsBoston.org has a dedicated Kids section and “Family Fun” recommendations that are easily reached from a tab on the home page. At any given time, browsers might find listings for music and movement classes for parents and toddlers, science-themed juggling performances, a Renaissance chamber music concert, a marionette performance, an exhibit about the language of color in nature, or classic children’s theater performed by local actors or by national touring companies.

The Kids and Family Fun-designated listings also expand on the information offered on BosTix Jr. by adding video clips and links to published reviews. ArtsBoston encourages feedback from users (which is monitored before posting).

Tapping younger audiences softens economic blows

During their membership in the Participation Learning Network many cultural organizations were forced to cope with unanticipated losses of earned income. ArtsBoston certainly didn't foresee the financial downturn or its impact on arts spending, but the organization's family-oriented listings and ticket promotions offered members a timely and effective means to reach an audience that they may have previously overlooked.

"Part of the joy of these programs is that they are not just for organizations that do family shows," says Executive Director Catherine Peterson. "It's a great way to remind all companies to think about whether a production is suitable for teenagers or for families."

To spur companies to cast the widest net for audience members, ArtsBoston added a "suitable age or grade range" to the online forms that companies fill out for upcoming productions.

The Huntington Theatre Company took advantage of BosTix Jr. (as well as the Mayor's Holiday Special) to promote its production of *A Civil War Christmas* by Paula Vogel. "It was the first time we have had a Christmas-related show appropriate for families," says Director of Marketing Temple Gill. She noted a significant increase over previous productions in advance ticket sales through BosTix and was pleased to observe a greater number of people age 18 and under in the audience.

"It has changed my thinking," says Gill. "I don't want to make pre-judgments. Many of our productions are not inherently family-oriented, but may be appropriate for the right family."

As the name suggests, Wheelock Family Theatre is dedicated to enabling children and families to share the experience of live theater. "I've been a big fan of ArtsBoston for creating the category of family entertainment," says Director of Marketing Charles Baldwin. "Like us, they use a broad definition of shows that youth can appreciate."

Wheelock has been an ArtsBoston member for years, but Baldwin admits that efforts to sell half-price tickets on the day of a performance were not particularly successful. "Tourists have already made plans," he says, "and parents need more time to plan for a family outing." Baldwin has increased the number of reduced price advance tickets that he offers through BosTix Jr. and is experiencing a higher level of sales. "Now we are offering more tickets and all are selling."

Baldwin is not concerned about increased competition from other organizations just starting to target family ticket-buyers. "It's good to be part of a larger collective," he says. "Other groups feed the interest in what we do."

Even during a faltering economy, Baldwin takes the long view. "Because we work with children, we don't have an idea that the population has maxed out. People are still having babies."

“We wanted to make the leap to becoming an even more comprehensive source of information about family-friendly programming.”

– John Beck

Parents often offer first-hand advice on how children of different ages have responded to a particular production.

Users who wish to purchase full-price tickets are directed to the arts organization itself, making it difficult to track overall sales. Those who want to purchase half-price tickets offered by ArtsBoston members can link directly to BosTix Jr. Roughly 15 percent of BosTix Jr. ticket buyers come from the Kids and Family Fun sections of ArtsBoston.org. The ArtsBoston.org web site receives about 60,000 unique visitors per month, while BosTix Jr.org receives about 20,000.

In addition, the list of people who wish to receive a weekly e-mail “blast” of family-friendly programming has grown to 12,000 names (of the 36,000 total on the ArtsBoston e-mail list). This timely message includes information only about ArtsBoston member organizations and is a significant benefit of membership. (Beck estimates that a handful of organizations have joined ArtsBoston to access member services after participating in the all-inclusive calendar listings.)

ArtsBoston used its PLN funding with an eye towards efficiency and sustainability. One overarching need was to develop cost-effective strategies to raise awareness of BosTix Jr. and the subsequent Kids and Family section of ArtsBoston.org.

Working with a marketing consultant, ArtsBoston secured in-kind radio spots for a weekly “Family Night Out Guide” and developed an informal partnership with a parent-oriented web site. This work is ongoing and staff plan to cultivate relationships with more family-related listservs and web sites to help disseminate information. The Kids and Family content of ArtsBoston.org

is already being syndicated to the web sites of Boston’s WGBH public broadcasting station and WBUR public radio and to the Greater Boston Convention & Visitors Bureau. To further tap the tourist market, ArtsBoston distributes flyers to hotels and visitor centers and will soon launch a weekly e-mail bulletin for hotel concierges.

ArtsBoston has begun to build stronger relationships with visual arts organizations and maintains a particularly beneficial collaboration with fellow PLN participant, the Boston Mayor’s Office of Arts, Tourism & Special Events (see page 89), to promote arts events during the November and December holiday season. Demand for family-friendly fare peaks during the holidays and in one year alone, ArtsBoston sold 8,000 tickets for family programs through BosTix Jr. and converted some holiday buyers to repeat customers through special incentive offers. To reach diverse families throughout Greater Boston, staff also plan to intensify outreach to social service agencies, libraries, and culture-specific organizations.

Staff time, however, is at a premium. Five of ArtsBoston’s ten full-time staff members are involved in the marketing and upkeep of the web sites. No new staff positions have been added, although the organization’s new strategic plan calls for the addition of a part-time outreach coordinator within the next two years to sustain some of the momentum related to this project.

With a firm organizational commitment to family outreach and a growing list of participating organizations and consumers, Beck notes that one thing is missing—a title sponsor willing to make a multi-year commitment. “We’re getting good traffic on the web site. It could be a nice halo effect for a corporate sponsor. We usually introduce programs to benefit our members, but this is a benefit to the whole community.”



Game On

Boston Children's Museum tests models of multilingual family outreach

For almost a century, Boston Children's Museum has played a singular role in the life of families of Greater Boston, offering children their first opportunity to visit a museum and often providing their first formal experiences in theater, visual arts, or music. As a "gateway" institution that opens the door to arts and cultural opportunities, the museum's impact is not limited to the youngest family members. "Half of our audience is over 18," says Megan Dickerson, Manager of Community Programs & Partnerships. "We're often an adult's first museum experience, particularly in the case of people from countries without an institutional arts culture similar to the United States."

In 1979 Boston Children's Museum moved into a red-brick, late-19th century former wool warehouse on Fort Point Channel. An extensive green renovation and facility expansion, completed in April 2007, earned the museum the U.S. Building Council's LEED Gold Certification and provided space for more programs and exhibitions. When the museum joined the Participation Learning Network (PLN) a year later, it decided to reinforce its role as a gateway through outreach to "New Bostonian" families of diverse linguistic, national, and ethnic backgrounds as well as low income families.

“One of our challenges was to create a program that would appeal to every member of a family.”

– Megan Dickerson

Boston Children’s Museum cultivates ongoing involvement through family memberships, which include free admission for up to six people. At the same time, it emphasizes affordability by offering \$1 admission on Friday nights, thanks to sponsorship by Target. Moreover, most libraries in Massachusetts have library memberships to the museum, which provide discount admissions coupons.

The PLN project built on outreach efforts at community events during the summer of 2007. “We went to cultural festivals, took pictures of people in a traveling photo booth, then printed sticker pictures,” says Dickerson. Everyone was then invited to a party at the end of the summer. Staff wanted to further explore the potential of coupling community outreach with a culminating, museum-based event as a means to encourage museum visitation.

The concept was refined, in part, by a model developed by the Berwick Research Institute, a Roxbury-based nonprofit organization that brings artists and audiences together to foster community. Dickerson had been involved in a series of dinner table discussions among community organizers, urban designers, arts administrators, and artists about the role of art in activating public spaces. She recognized that it is natural for people to gather around a table and that sharing a meal helps to break down barriers.

In a twist on the Berwick model, the museum conducted outreach at community events as a prelude to “Boston’s Biggest Dinner Party” on the Harborwalk in front of the museum. The project involved the museum’s Community Programs staff, volunteers from the Berwick Research Institute, and the museum’s BNY Mellon City ACCESS Teen Ambassadors, who speak some of the top six languages spoken in Boston public schools.

Before each event, staff met with organizers to formulate an appropriate food-related activity that would serve as “a kind of an elaborate invitation to the big dinner party at the end of the summer,” says Dickerson. After experiencing “what we do and the people who do it,” she reasoned that people from different neighborhoods will be more likely to come together at one table.

Over the course of the summer, museum staff and volunteers attended and hosted activities at the Cape Verdean Community UNIDO Independence Day celebration on City Hall Plaza, the Boston Chinatown Neighborhood Center Oak Street Fair, the Brazilian Women’s Group Brazilian Independence Day celebration in Brighton, the Dragon Boat Festival in Cambridge (with performances by Indian, Korean, Chinese, and Japanese groups), the Cambridge Caribbean Carnival, and the Festival Betances celebration of Puerto Rican and Latino culture in the Villa Victoria community in the South End.

Boston Children’s Museum also incorporated its ongoing work with the Boston Housing Authority into the outreach project. Community Programs staff worked in three month sessions at Old Colony Housing Development in South Boston, Gallivan Community Development in Mattapan, Washington Beach Development in Roslindale, and Charlestown Development in Charlestown.

At each event, families were encouraged to attend the Biggest Dinner Party. To further the museum’s role in promoting local arts opportunities, staff also distributed copies of “Boston Children’s Museum: Gateway to the Arts.” This pilot multilingual brochure offering suggestions on low-cost arts activities in Boston was supported through the PLN initiative.

To follow up on the personal contacts made at the events, invitations to the Biggest Dinner Party

were sent to the community partners, residents at the Boston Housing Authority developments, and families who signed up at the events. (Although the museum was prepared to issue invitations in six languages, English and Spanish were the only preferred languages indicated by participants.) All museum members were also invited.

Weather did not cooperate on the evening of the Biggest Dinner Party. Wind and rain forced staff to move the tables indoors and also prevented many families from traveling to the museum.

Nonetheless, about 280 people ate dinner at the tables in the museum's broad first-floor hallway and about 550 people participated in other activities planned for the evening, including a museum-wide scavenger hunt. The last-minute change of plans made things a bit chaotic and crowded and forced the postponement of some activities. But it also encouraged complete strangers to talk to each other — one of the outcomes the planners had hoped for.

In addition to the families attending the Biggest Dinner Party, museum staff also facilitated arts activities with about 1,600 people at community events. The museum deemed the overall project a success, but staff did evaluate the experience to determine what lessons they could apply to any further outreach efforts. They decided that participating in community festivals was no longer the most effective way to raise visibility. The hands-on arts activities that have been so successful in the past are attracting fewer families and it has become increasingly difficult to compete with giant bounce-houses and slip 'n' slides.

By contrast, the outreach work in conjunction with the Boston Housing Authority allowed

staff to build relationships over time, making it more likely that families will visit the museum on their own and feel comfortable in the unfamiliar environment. Staff concluded that such focused, longer-term programs would offer the greatest success in measurable involvement with the museum, such as new memberships.

In addition, while staff are convinced that the “Gateway” arts guide is a valuable resource, they realized that families will be more receptive if it is distributed through a “trusted broker.” The museum joined forces with the Boston Public Library Community Service Department to include the guide in a mailing to all Boston public school students and teachers in the summer of 2009. This partnership expanded the reach of the guide from 4,000 people as originally projected to more than 50,000.

The thoughtful evaluation, combined with consultation with peer museums in Houston, Chicago, and Brooklyn, led to a major change in direction for the second phase of PLN funding. “We traveled the city only to find that some of the people we looked for were already attending on Friday nights,” said Dickerson. In fact, the Friday night crowd is the museum's most diverse and staff decided to focus on developing activities to enhance visitors' experiences and encourage them to return.





“We are getting better at documenting what we are doing and what works.... Our goal is to build a structure of belonging.”

– Megan Dickerson

To gain a fuller understanding of their multilingual visitors, the museum engaged students from the Boston University School of Management to conduct a study of Friday Family Nights, including a survey of those who attend. The museum also created a working group of four cultural organizations and four community-based ESOL programs to share ideas about how to increase the connection among

families learning English and museums.

The Boston University study indicated that families would welcome greater involvement with Boston Children’s Museum and with each other. Although many were not previously aware of the membership program, they would consider joining if they could purchase membership on a monthly, rather than annual basis. Data also showed that many families visit the museum in multigenerational groups.

“One of our challenges was to create a program that would appeal to every member of a family,” says Dickerson. What emerged was “Game On,” a model participatory game that leads visitors through the museum and that can be adapted to suit specific age groups and to explore varying themes.

The model was tested in the galleries in the fall of 2009 and debuted as “Operation: Spy Challenge” in December. On three Fridays a month, visitors are encouraged to adopt a “spy name,” follow clues throughout the museum, and engage in art-related games with museum staff and the bilingual Teen Ambassadors. “It’s dramatic play,” says Dickerson. “Visitors inhabit a character.”

While the basic concept remains the same, the specifics of the game are changed each week

so that returning families will discover something new. To further encourage repeat visits, families can earn eight levels of spy certificates by successfully completing the challenges.

“We wanted to start simple and get people engaged. We’re hitting most of our outcomes,” says Dickerson. “More people are coming on Friday,” including member families who are also intrigued by the participatory activities. As the game evolves, Dickerson would like to find ways to promote more interaction among visiting families and would like to break down the language barrier for families who don’t speak English as a first language. One remedy, she notes, might be to have visual images of the game on a wireless computer.

Boston Children’s Museum plans to continue to offer Operation: Spy Challenge activities. It has proven to be a good model to “spread people throughout the building and promote some kind of connection with staff,” says Dickerson. Moreover staff have tested this activity and may incorporate it into the museum’s after-school curriculum.

The museum is still exploring ways to make membership and admissions as affordable as possible. Options might include more flexible membership categories or a “bring a friend” program to encourage visitors to introduce another family to the museum. Staff were able to collect e-mail addresses for Friday night visitors so that they can receive program updates.

“Because we had this grant, we had time to really think about the project and how our efforts fit in with what others in the community are doing,” says Dickerson. “We are getting better at documenting what we are doing and what works as we develop programs for kids and adults. Our goal is to build a structure of belonging.”

Family Ties

Boston Lyric Opera embraces families to build future audiences

As the largest opera company in New England, Boston Lyric Opera (BLO) feels a keen responsibility toward the long-term growth and vitality of the art form. In keeping with this commitment, the company dedicated its Wallace Excellence Award to expanding family programming as a means to nurture future generations of opera lovers.

“It fits right in with our mission to educate and build audiences as a way to ensure the continued existence of opera,” says Marie Coste, BLO’s Institutional Giving Officer.

The BLO already had a successful program to build on. For more than 30 years, Opera New England (now called Opera for Young Audiences) has presented one-hour, English-language versions of well-known operas in schools and community centers across the region and has produced a weekend day of performances in Boston.

“We have had a lot of success with these performances,” says Judith McMichael, former Director of Marketing and Business Partnerships. “We felt that we had a winner.” The core component of the BLO’s plan was to bring these performances to family audiences in Greater Boston communities.

Boston Lyric Opera defined its target audience as children ages 6 to 12 along with their families, noting that research by the service organization Opera America has shown that people

who were introduced to opera at an early age were most likely to attend performances as adults. Moreover, family experiences are usually most effective at introducing people to the arts.

Although it proved more difficult than expected to find venues with the technical capacity for opera productions, by the fourth year of the project BLO had met its goal of presenting two family performances each

in four communities. The company chose areas with a density of families and primarily targeted suburban communities within a 45-minute commute to Boston, reasoning that patrons would be willing to travel into the city for other BLO programs.

During the third year, BLO also established a family performance base in Boston at the Strand Theatre in Dorchester. “Our school performances at the Strand are very successful,” says Coste. But after two years of outreach, partnerships, local advertising, and significant dis-



JEFFREY DUNN FOR BOSTON LYRIC OPERA 2010

“We hope these kids grow up to love opera, whether they are here or elsewhere.”

– Eileen Williston

counts in ticket prices, the company was unable to attract a substantial family audience. Taking a more long-term approach, BLO will continue to offer school performances at the Strand, but will present family performances at the Wheelock Family Theatre, which has a track record of family programming and commitment to diversity.

Despite such setbacks, BLO’s outreach efforts proved, on the whole, to be successful. After three years, attendance at family performances had increased from a baseline of 742 tickets to 3,858. In addition, the percentage of adults who attended both a family performance and at least one mainstage performance doubled from 1.9 to 3.8 percent. Capturing these adults is significant because BLO’s ongoing audience research indicates that “the majority of parents or other adult ticket buyers have been to opera before and want to expose their children to opera and culture,” says Coste.

To create more pathways to opera exposure, BLO introduced free family previews — often held in libraries — of upcoming operas. “Fewer of the people who attend family previews have been to opera before,” says Julie House, Education and Community Programs Manager.

BLO’s audience research found that 45 percent of the adults at the free previews had never attended an opera, versus only 15 percent of adults at family performances. “It’s a good opportunity for us to work on audience development with parents and their kids,” says House. Since the audience is largely unfamiliar with the art form, the company has learned that it is important to offer a brief curtain speech that introduces the specific opera and outlines the basics of opera etiquette.

The free previews also further marketing efforts by building buzz for upcoming performances. BLO’s audience research revealed that direct mail and word-of-mouth are the most effective means to reach its audience. “The parents belong to the age group that is connected on the Internet. Connecting with a couple of these people really magnifies our voice,” says McMichael. “I called everybody I know who has children. The wife of our board chairman hosted mothers in her home.” After a two-year trial, advertising on PBS children’s programming failed to yield significant results and was discontinued.

“The Wallace grant has given us the opportunity to be nimble in how to reach young people,” says Eileen Williston, Director of Development. “We hope these kids grow up to love opera, whether they are here or elsewhere.” The company will continue its audience development efforts at the end of the grant period, though it remains to be seen whether they will be able to secure enough funding to maintain the same level of programming.

Nonetheless, the Wallace grant served as a catalyst for a profound change in the organization. BLO presents three mainstage operas a year at the Shubert Theatre and has now added a fourth production, the Opera Annex, in an alternative space. The endeavor is intended to nurture new audiences by performing in a community setting.

“You’ve got to get the experience out there so those for whom it will resonate will get the opportunity to experience it,” McMichael says.

Next Generation

Institute of Contemporary Art draws teens in the doors

The Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) was determined that local teens would embrace its new facility, which opened on Fan Pier in December 2006. There's a natural affinity between students and contemporary artists, says former Associate Director of Education Rosanna Flouty, who oversees the ICA teen programs. "The artists ask the same questions as teens. They have the same curiosities about the world."

The first new museum built in Boston in a century features expansive galleries, a 325-seat theater, a digital art and media resource center, and a two-story education center. Freed from its cramped Back Bay quarters, the ICA has expanded beyond its original focus on visual arts to more fully embrace performing and media arts. With increased programming opportunities, the ICA used its Wallace Foundation award



“We created a safe environment,” says Monica Garza, that is not tied to traditional neighborhoods, schools, or social networks.

to reach and engage urban middle- and high-school students and to diversify its teen audience.

“The Wallace grant helped us to rethink our infrastructure for delivering services to teens,” says Director of Education Monica Garza. The ICA built on existing programs and launched new ones to offer teens choices that ranged from informal to in-depth experiences.

Through WallTalk, the ICA works with local schools on visual and verbal learning programs, but teens are as likely to discover the museum through the more casual Friday Teen Nights. Once the ICA has caught their attention, teens can enroll in short-term classes in new media or Artist Encounters with artists working in a variety of disciplines. Teens willing to make a long-term commitment can opt for an academic year film program or join the Teen Arts Council to plan programs for their peers.

As a pioneer in redevelopment of Boston’s waterfront, the ICA focused outreach on its South Boston neighborhood, as well as on Dorchester and Roxbury — all neighborhoods served by the Silver Line public transit route that has made the waterfront more accessible. “The highest density of people under 18 are in Dorchester,” says Flouty. In addition, slightly more than half of Boston’s low and moderate income families live in these three multicultural neighborhoods.

Several months before the new ICA opened, staff visited public schools to build interest in the museum and to emphasize that it was free for ages 17 and under. “I don’t think those teens had a mental picture of what a contemporary art museum would be,” says Flouty. “It was an abstraction. They didn’t even know where Fan Pier was.”

Nonetheless, in the first five months, almost 600 teens attended three Teen Nights. During a three-year period, about 6,000 youth took part in ICA programs — 1,000 more than planners had anticipated. In addition, about two-thirds of participants hailed from the ICA’s three target neighborhoods. “We created a safe environment,” says Garza, that is not tied to traditional neighborhoods, schools, or social networks.

Yet the ICA acknowledges that work remains to be done. A 2009 survey in Boston public schools revealed that although 59 percent of students considered the ICA to be affordable, only 28 percent knew where it was located and only half would be comfortable visiting alone.

To complement staff outreach in the public schools, the ICA formed partnerships with arts, social service, and educational institutions in the target neighborhoods. The Teen Arts Council, a 12-member group with representatives from across Boston, meets weekly to develop programs for their peers. This direct teen involvement is one of the keys to the ICA’s image as relevant and welcoming to a demographic that, as Flouty says, “has the most sensitive ‘b-s’ meter.”

“The teen audience is all about one-on-one,” concurs Garza. “It really works well for teens to formally or informally talk to each other, articulate why they are participating, and get other teens excited and involved.”

In addition to person-to-person networking, targeted e-mail blasts and social networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace have proven most effective in reaching teens. “Creating the teen web site (www.icateens.org) was really important,” says Garza, who notes that the ICA is using the web site to consolidate marketing efforts.

To date, about 60 percent of participating teens attend informal drop-in programs. “When we started, it was impossible to predict how a teen might move through the trajectory from drop-in to sustained programs or the Teen Arts Council,” says Flouty. “We still have questions about how to best articulate that path.”

Staff are grappling, for example, with the question of offering programs at no cost or charging tuition. “We’re not certain if tuition is seen as a deterrent,” says Flouty. “There does seem to be a perception of value for ‘scholarship’ programs, versus saying that the programs are free.”

Since the ICA is committed to empowering teens, it stands to reason that they are turning to this group for frank discussions about the role of arts programs in their lives. In August 2009 the ICA launched its first national arts conference for teens, educators, and artists. Representa-

tives from the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Museum of Contemporary Art North Miami, the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, and Marwen in Chicago all came to Boston for “Generation O: A National Convening for Teens in the Arts.”

“We put teens in the center of the conversations,” says Flouty. Topics ranged from controversy and art, to the best qualifications for a youth administrator, to the benefits of gender-specific programs. “I accepted that these teen-led conversations could unravel,” she says, “but the teens excelled in the leadership role.”

The ICA expects to maintain the same level of teen programming as was supported by the Wallace grant. “We like the program range and options,” says Garza. “We will continue to evaluate. But this is an institutional commitment. If anything it will grow.”



Many Happy Returns

Museum of Fine Arts reaches out to infrequent visitors

“We wanted to offer experiences that would appeal to people of different learning styles.”

– Lynn Courtney

Infrequent adult visitors may be one of the most elusive of demographic categories in any cultural organization’s audience-building efforts. The Museum of Fine Arts (MFA) defines them as people over the age of 18 who have visited any art museum at least once, but not more than twice, during the previous two years. To motivate these already culturally inclined individuals to visit more frequently, the MFA sought to enhance the museum-going experience through what Alford Curator of Education Barbara Martin calls a strategy of “guerrilla interpretation.”

She explains that “we wanted to reach the general visitor who is less likely to use an audio guide, attend a lecture, or take a full guided tour.” The goal was to boil down “what’s fun, engaging, and human about our programs into a brief gallery encounter.”

With income from an endowment established with Wallace Foundation support, the Education department and curatorial staff were able to pilot and evaluate several in-gallery interpretive measures. “We wanted to offer experiences that would appeal to people of different learning styles,” says Lynn Courtney, Head of Planning and Evaluation.

Beginning in November 2007, the MFA began to offer Spotlight Talks in the galleries, focusing on one to three works of art. These brief encounters were designed to spark questions and

promote conversation among visitors. Moreover, says Martin, “We wanted to empower visitors by modeling questions that they can ask themselves as they continue looking on their own.”

The MFA introduced the Artists’ Toolbox in June 2008, and has commissioned two custom carts stocked with materials that demonstrate some of the techniques used to create the works in the galleries, including painting, mosaic, marble sculpture, and Japanese wood blocks. “Wallace support allowed us to commission quality materials for the cart,” says Martin, “so that we can offer visitors a tactile, high-quality encounter.”

To inform future in-gallery interpretive activities, staff also evaluated visitor response to an interactive touch screen that had been installed earlier to allow visitors to look more closely at the paintings on Maya ceramics.

Visitor satisfaction surveys indicated that “all three types of engagement are rated highly,” says Courtney. “People who take advantage of them find the whole museum experience to be better than expected. If they rate an activity as outstanding, they are more likely to rate the whole museum experience positively.”

Younger visitors were most likely to rate the interactive touch screen as outstanding, perhaps because it allows them to set their own time limits without committing to even a brief interaction with staff in the galleries. But many visitors



MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, BOSTON

particularly value the human encounter. For the Spotlight Talks, staff had originally anticipated that adjunct lecturers would handle most of the in-gallery presentations. But junior curatorial and conservation staff wanted to participate and their involvement added another dimension to the experience. Feedback from visitors indicated that they appreciated interactions with museum personnel who are familiar with the objects and able to offer a personal, behind-the-scenes look at the museum.

“My instinct as an educator is that no single approach is the most effective,” says Martin. “The more interpretive means that people use — from labels on up — the greater their satisfaction. We always have to balance what can be universally available, such as a touch screen, with more personal in-depth experiences.”

Visitors who were directed to a drop-in gallery event by a museum staff member tended to rate the experience most highly. Acknowledging that on-site communication can be improved, Martin notes that the museum is adding an additional plasma screen in the information center focusing only on drop-in events. At the same time, she says, “Facebook and other social media seem to work well for drop-in events. We want visitors to have an overall sense of lots of unusual and interesting things going on.”

The MFA has installed a number of touch screens in the new Art of the Americas wing and offered a flurry of Spotlight Talks in the opening weeks. Spotlight Talks and Artist’s Toolbox encounters will continue throughout the museum. “They complement our other programs and represent the kind of experience that the museum wants to provide to visitors,” says Courtney. “They give visitors permission to slow down.”

Moreover, she notes that research has shown that compared to the overall MFA visitor profile, “the users of these learning opportunities are less likely to be frequent visitors,” meaning that the programs in the collection galleries are reaching their intended demographic. But she is hesitant to speculate on whether the availability of drop-in gallery events has increased the rate of repeat visitation. The MFA is planning a second follow-up study to try to determine the correlation between visitor satisfaction and repeat visitation.

But the MFA has already deemed the initiative a success. Martin notes that PLN speaker Alan Brown (see page 62) identified intellectual stimulation as one of the key benefits of arts participation. “These programs animate the museum experience,” she says. “The primary reason people come here is for the art. These interventions promote active engagement with the gallery experience. Our short form motto is ‘Slow them down.’”

Digital Outreach and Education

With the Internet becoming ubiquitous, web-based service to constituents has become all the more critical and played a role in numerous Participation Learning Network projects. Three organizations made it their primary focus to retool, expand, and re-imagine their web sites to engage their audiences through auxiliary educational features, glimpses behind the scenes, and forums for dialogue.



Cyber Salon

The American Repertory Theater blog spurs talk and ticket sales

“With our audience, encouraging them to engage does seem to deepen connections and build loyalty.”

– Ruth Davidson

This is the most phenomenal production I have seen at the A.R.T. Szasz is a genius who isn't afraid to take risks ... who conveys poetic imagery in every ounce of his blocking.

SO glad you asked how we like the play. We HATED it. ... So self-indulgent and non-engaging. What were they thinking?

Providing this forum for comment is terrific — thanks A.R.T. Is anyone else surprised by the extremely wide range of reaction to this show?

Excerpts from blog posts about the A.R.T. production of *The Seagull* (2009)

Judging by the buzz of voices during intermissions, there is really no question that American Repertory Theater (A.R.T.) audiences have strong, even contradictory reactions to the drama unfolding onstage.

Since April 2008, those intense conversations have not gone silent once the theater goes dark. Audience members have been invited to “Talk Back” on the often thoughtful, sometimes contentious, and always lively blog on the theater company’s web site (www.americanrepertorytheater.org).

The “Performance Feedback E-mail Program” was launched with a grant from the Participation Learning Network (PLN). “We wanted to use a small amount of grant money effectively,” says Ruth Davidson, the A.R.T.’s former Director of Communications and Marketing. “We wanted to do something risky that we couldn’t otherwise do.”

The theater set out to test its supposition that deepening audience members’ engagement with the company through cost-effective electronic channels would translate into more repeat ticket-buyers. The best time to reach out to patrons, the A.R.T. suspected, would be when the experience of a production was fresh and the theater-goers were experiencing the immediate flush of their emotional and intellectual response to the work.

Organizations throughout the country are grappling with new ways to make audience members a more integral part of the artistic experience. Presentations to PLN participants and discussions with their peers helped advance the A.R.T.’s thinking. The project ultimately took shape through brainstorming sessions involving the A.R.T.’s literary, artistic, and marketing staff. As they considered various models, two initiatives that took advantage of electronic communications media stood out.

Davidson recalled that the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra had experimented with displaying text messages on a screen mounted

on the side of the proscenium before concerts and during intermission. (The Symphony was funded through the Heinz Endowments' Arts Experience Initiative.) Another staff member described receiving an e-mail from a New York theater company shortly after he returned home from a performance. The message included a coupon for a discount on another ticket.

"We wanted to achieve similar immediacy," says Davidson, but did not want to risk creating a distraction during productions. Hence the "Performance Feedback E-mail Program" was born.

"We thought people in our audiences would be interested in talking to each other," Davidson says.

Playwright Christine Evans said, "I'm not interested in simply taking a play and dressing it in modern clothes without creating a real dialogue between the past and the present." How did this dialogue between the past and the present resonate for you?

Question sent to audience members after attending a production of *Trojan Barbie* (2009)

The "Performance Feedback E-mail Program" has an elegant simplicity: Send audience members an e-mail asking them what they thought about the production. Behind the scenes, however, these electronic communications require a coordinated, cross-departmental effort.

The marketing department had already been capturing the e-mail addresses of as many ticket-buyers as possible and house management was recruited to take responsibility for sending the e-mail message thirty minutes after each performance had ended.

The timing was deliberate. The A.R.T. wanted to avoid "Blackberry buzz" during the show, but still wanted to reach audience members while they were in "the psychic and emotional phase after the production," says Davidson.

The messages invite the recipients to respond to two or three questions about the performance they have just seen. Those audience members who respond tend to do so within 36 hours. Literary and marketing staff collaborate on developing the questions and are not averse to refining them during the run of a production if the original questions fail to spark the interest of audience members.

"We spend a lot of time thinking about the questions," admits Ryan McKittrick, Co-head of Dramaturgy. "Academic questions appeal to a certain group," he says, while the most successful questions encourage creativity in crafting a response. "Some people like to respond to very focused questions," McKittrick says, "but one question always asks for an overall reaction to the production—something on the order of 'What did you think?'"

The process of formulating the questions and evaluating the feedback has been beneficial for the literary department. Says McKittrick, "It helps us think about how to talk about the show with the public in pre- and post-show discussions—how we will guide the public dialogue."



PHOTO BY TYLER KONGSLIE

I thought the play was very well acted and very boring. I found very little humor or any other redeeming features.

Endgame is what theatre should be. It was funny and then painful and finally beautiful.

Excerpts from blog posts about the A.R.T. production of *Endgame* (2009)

McKittrick, who often addresses up to 100 people in post-production discussions, admits to being sometimes surprised by specific comments on the blog, but not by the overall volume of response. In the first six months of the e-mail program, the A.R.T. received 478 responses, almost meeting its goal of 500. Moreover, 1,047 click-throughs to the blog far exceeded the goal of 600.

“Our audience always wants to discuss the production,” he says, “whether they liked it or not.”

A portion of the PLN grant funded the time of former literary intern Sara Bookin-Weiner to oversee the responses to the direct e-mail. Originally, responders were asked for permission to add their contributions to the blog. While about 90 percent of the comments were posted as written, Bookin-Weiner did edit out any vulgarity, hate speech, or plot-revealing spoilers.

“It was fine if the comments were critical,” says McKittrick. Although he admits that it can be emotionally difficult to post negative remarks about friends and colleagues, the A.R.T. stuck to its intention of creating what he calls “a free, open forum.”

As the number of responses to the direct e-mails grew, it became clear that the A.R.T. audience community did not need a moderator for the blog forum. Indeed, as the blog took on a life of its own, the A.R.T. allowed it to become more

user-driven. Now audience members and anyone else who completes a simple on-line registration can post directly to the blog without the intervention of an in-house screening. (Comments are still monitored for inappropriate language.)

“The more we have stepped back, the more successful and free-flowing the blog has become,” says McKittrick. “I see the power of the gut reaction of the blog. It has generated a great dialogue.”

Disjointed scenes with no beginning or end, no matter how well done, do not really convey specific meaning of any kind. Narrative is needed for intent to ultimately translate into art in the viewer's mind.

I find it really interesting that the poster above assumes that theatre must have a linear narrative to have meaning. How much of this is fact and how much personal preference?

Excerpts of audience comments about the A.R.T. production of *Sleep No More* (2009)

In the beginning phase of the project, staff were most interested in responders' thoughts and opinions. Although the A.R.T. did not ask for demographic information, the company did contract with an outside firm to analyze ticket-buying habits of the bloggers to determine whether enhanced engagement did, in fact, translate into increased sales to those who posted.

Preliminary analysis demonstrated a positive correlation between blog participation and purchasing patterns, validating the A.R.T.'s initial proposition. Single ticket-buyers who contributed to the blog during spring 2008 were found to subscribe to the 2009 season at a rate exactly 10 percent higher than the general single ticket buyer population.

Voices from the back of the house

Analysis of ticket-buying habits has shown that American Repertory Theater (A.R.T.) audience members who participated in the blog also had a higher level of ticket-buying activity. It is more difficult to measure success in achieving the less quantifiable goal of deepening audience members' connections to the company.

Conversations with several bloggers revealed that they already consider themselves part of a community of adventurous theater-goers, or what subscriber Tom Quintal calls “the ecosystem that surrounds the productions.” They are committed to supporting a company that is willing to take artistic risks and acknowledge that they don't expect to like every production. Nor do bloggers expect that their comments will impact artistic decisions. But they are enthusiastic about the opportunity to communicate easily with people who share their passion for the theater, if not their opinions on specific productions and artistic choices.

In many ways, the A.R.T. audience was a community of bloggers-in-waiting.

In creating the blog, the A.R.T. gave this loosely knit group of people a communal place—essentially an electronic hearth—where they expand and elaborate on their shared experience in the darkened house. In strengthening the identification with the A.R.T., the theater has also empowered a community of disparate audience members to engage each other as a fellowship of peers.

“Having a way to interact about productions is a brilliant use of technology,” says Quintal, who runs a mid-size technology consulting firm. He reads the posts after he has attended a production. “To see different perspectives and interpretations opens your mind up,” he says. He welcomes a vigorous debate, but has been prompted to post his own comments when he felt that a discussion was becoming too negative to be productive.

During the 2008-2009 season long-time subscriber Lajos Heder, an artist involved in public art projects, commented on three or four productions. He was pleasantly surprised when he received the first e-mail message asking for his feedback. “If you have a strong reaction, it's nice to have a place to voice it,” he says. “It's a way of venting, of letting your opinions out.”

Heder tends to blog when he has had a particularly strong reaction (either positive or negative) to a play. “It's interesting to see the range of responses and to put in my two cents' worth,” he says.

Patrons' embrace of the blog supports Dr. Lynne Conner's (see page 47) contentions about what modern audiences for the arts crave. “Like their forebears in the amphitheaters of 5th century Athens, the 18th century concert halls of Germany and France, and the vaudeville palaces of 19th century America,” she wrote in a Heinz Endowments project brief, “they want a real forum—or several forums—for the interplay of ideas, experience, data, and feeling that make up the arts experience.”

Nor should the experience end at the lobby door. “What you feel while you are in the theater is the most powerful, but following the blog afterwards keeps the production resonating,” Heder says. “It extends the time you spend thinking about what you've just seen. Otherwise it more or less ends with the evening.”



PHOTO BY MARCUS STERN

By the same token, the renewal rate among subscribers who responded to the blog was 17 percent higher than the historic renewal rate. Even subscribers who received e-mail messages but chose not to respond increased their renewal rate by 4 percent. By contrast, those who did not receive e-mails had the lowest rate of either new subscriptions or subscription renewals.

The evidence is certainly encouraging, but Davidson admits that the A.R.T. was committed to the blog even before the first results were in. “Even if the blog had not been successful in building sales, we wouldn’t have stopped,” she says. “We’ve proved that it has an impact.”

Those numbers only tell part of the story. “With our audience, encouraging them to engage does seem to deepen connections and build loyalty,” Davidson says, noting that the comments on the blog are often “profound.” The passion that audience members bring to the discussion of productions has reverberated within the organization as well. “There’s a greater interest now across A.R.T. in understanding the audience experience, in bringing in the audience voice,” Davidson says.

As a director, my driving source of inspiration is the audience. ... Our new initiative, Experience the A.R.T., seeks to revolutionize the theater experience by giving audiences a voice, a sense of ownership, and a feeling of importance in the theatrical event.”

Diane Paulus, Artistic Director/CEO

The A.R.T. launched a new web site in April 2009 to coincide with the announcement of the 2009-2010 season—the first under Diane Paulus. The web site is a key component in achieving her vision of “giving audiences a voice.” The A.R.T. focused on expanding the interactive aspects of the web site, drawing on the model of the blog to build community and increase ticket sales.

Communications Manager Amanda Gutowski oversaw the development of the web site. “We chose the Drupal content management system,” she says, “because it’s optimized for audience involvement.” A tease for the latest blog subject now appears on the home page along with a link to the full statement and an invitation to “Talk Back.”

“Our goal was to increase the quantity of posting on the blog,” says Gutowski. While the marketing department staff are overseeing the initiative, they continue to work closely with the literary department to generate content and encourage public comment.

“We can tally the number of people commenting on a show and also the number of people talking to each other” says Gutowski. “It’s important to have that dialogue.”

I’m sure a lot of hard work went into this play, great effort. Glad to see a range of comments, that is why theater still exists. To invoke, to hate, to love.

Excerpt from blog post about the A.R.T. production of *The Seagull* (2009)

Seeking an Active Voice

Few people have studied the relation of audience and arts as closely as Dr. Lynne Conner, principal investigator for the Heinz Endowments' Arts Experience Initiative. Now Associate Professor and Theater and Dance Department Chair at Colby College, Conner spoke to Greater Boston cultural organizations on November 7, 2007 about her research into audience behavior that underpins the Heinz effort.

She has concluded that over the centuries audiences have lost their status as active participants in arts events and have been relegated to a more limited role as passive observers. To help organizations reverse that trend and engage their audiences as full partners in the arts experience, the Heinz Endowments launched the initiative in 2004 with funding for five organizations "to test new practices dedicated to enhancing an arts event through experiences that support and expand the arts itself."

In a project brief, Dr. Conner contends that "what today's potential arts audiences most want out of an arts event is the opportunity to co-author meaning. They want the opportunity to participate—in an intelligent and responsible way—in telling the meaning of an arts event."

"... what today's potential arts audiences most want out of an arts event is the opportunity to co-author meaning."

– Lynne Conner

(Dr. Conner's presentation is available on the WGBH Forum Network web site, <http://forum-network.org>. Conner also contributed to the book Engaging Art: The Next Great Transformation of America's Cultural Life, co-edited by William Ivey and Steven Tepper for the Curb Center for Art, Enterprise and Public Policy.)

Orchestrating New Media

The Boston Symphony Orchestra expands its digital platform

“You don’t get the results unless you pull it all together to create a real presence in the digital world.”

– Kim Noltemy

Anyone who doubts that new media have finally matured as a tool set for marketing and communication need only look at the experience of the Boston Symphony Orchestra (BSO). A little over a decade ago, online purchases accounted for just \$250,000 of the BSO’s total ticket sales and the idea of making a digital transaction met with considerable resistance. Today the BSO’s web site (www.bso.org) receives more than 5.5 million visitors per year. It is the most-visited orchestral web site in the country and generates more than \$9 million annually in ticket sales.

“You have to be in there early to be in a good position,” says Kim Noltemy, the BSO’s Director of Sales, Marketing and Communications. Moreover, she is acutely aware that any organization using new media should stay current with new capabilities. For that reason, the BSO directed the portion of its Wallace Excellence Award not earmarked for an endowment to enhancing and expanding its digital media and Internet-based marketing activities.

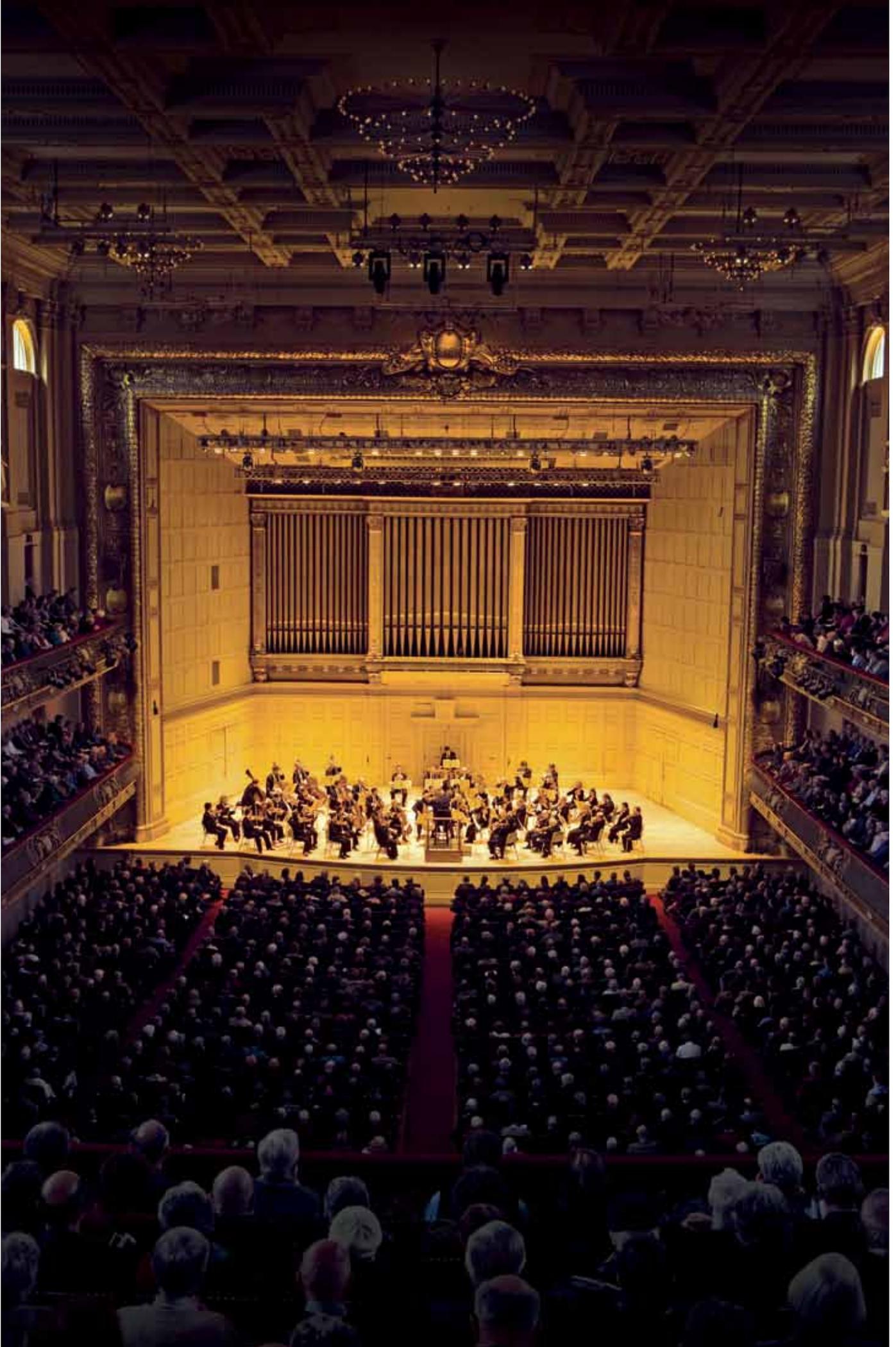
Given the proliferation of communications channels and social media, Noltemy says, “you don’t get the results unless you pull it all together to create a real presence in the digital world.”

Noltemy quickly acknowledges the risk that new technologies can become the tail that wags the dog. It is important that a marketing strategy

drive the use of new technology, rather than the reverse. In a comprehensive strategy, she notes, new technologies can be particularly effective in reaching the under-40 demographic who are still developing their cultural interests and patterns of attendance. “The way young people engage is so different,” says Noltemy. “We must use technology to reach them, even if they are not yet buying tickets.”

The BSO’s web site receives visitors from all over the world and functions as a digital avatar of the symphony’s flesh-and-blood identity—the bits and bytes of the orchestra’s brand. In 2007, the BSO completed the first large-scale renovation of the site in six years. “In an ideal world we would update every three years,” says Noltemy, citing budgetary considerations. “It was working well, but technology ages quickly. The new web site is more dynamic and can be refreshed more quickly.” Moreover, she notes, the new design provides a digital platform on which the BSO can build.

Among other features, the new site accommodates real-time donations and ticket sales and includes an interactive seating component that permits purchasers to visualize the view of the stage from their selected seats.





The web site also plays a significant role in the orchestra's educational efforts, including the ambitious Classical Companion. Launched in 2003, this interactive feature provides context for upcoming performances through interviews with composers and performers and other video and sound clips. More than 4.5 million people have used Classical Companion. "We have seen a ticket-purchasing result," says Noltemy, "but more people use it who are not coming to concerts."

A dynamic and useful web site is only the digital front door to an organization, and the BSO has been quick to capitalize on other new technologies. For the 2006-07 season, the BSO launched its first two podcasts, which are available through iTunes as well as for download from the web site. Initial strong response encouraged

staff to add video elements the following year. Weekly video podcasts now cover each BSO program as well as occasional Boston Pops performances and may be expanded to include concerts at Tanglewood, the BSO's summer home. The podcasts enjoy what Noltemy calls "a very loyal and specific audience" of 85,000 distinct weekly subscribers and downloaders.

The BSO has also ventured into applications targeted to users of other pocket technologies. The BSO devoted a significant portion of its Wallace funds to developing its first-ever Mobile Club, a free program that sends concert reminders and information as well as special ticket offers to members' smart phones. The London Symphony has demonstrated that this type of outreach can be very successful.

"Every meeting you're in, people are on their iPhones and Blackberries," observes Noltemy. "It's an important way of getting information."

Since a large number of BSO concert-goers use mobile phone technology, it opens a new avenue of communication. In addition, she says, staying current with technological opportunities “might provide us with a means to reach people who do not see the BSO as contemporary.”

The Mobile Club was launched in January 2009 and quickly grew to 1,100 members. College students (many of whom take advantage of the BSO’s College Card discount program) tend to be the biggest users. “We want to break into the existing BSO audience,” says Noltemy, who also hopes that the Mobile Club might further communication with the “unconverted trialists” who have attended a concert in the past but have not returned.

Wallace funds have permitted the BSO to accelerate the development of this new initiative by gathering timely data on the program rather than proceeding by trial and error. The BSO engaged Shugoll Research (www.shugollresearch.com) to survey Mobile Club members and prospects. The report revealed that although the Mobile Club is highlighted on the home page of the BSO web site, its visibility remains low and that only about one prospect in ten indicates that he or she would be very likely to join. In addition, the Mobile Club has not yet made a breakthrough to unconverted trialists, but is reaching those who are already committed consumers of classical music. Even those who text frequently did not indicate a higher level of interest.

On the other hand, Mobile Club members have a much more positive attitude about the BSO. Although many reported that Mobile Club messages duplicate the information already available online, almost half the members reported that they have attended concerts more frequently and that they feel better informed and more connected to the BSO.

Despite mixed results from the Shugoll survey, Noltemy reasons that mobile phone technology is too pervasive to ignore. The BSO plans to continue the program and may introduce additional ticketing offers to increase satisfaction and audience retention. “With the Wallace funds, we have been able to do each of these things at 100 percent effort,” says Noltemy. “If you have the support, you can put the full effort in and not give up if something does not work at first.”

Wallace funds are also allowing the BSO to study the web-based Classical Companion and the podcasts to determine how each service translates to concert attendance. “Each thing you do is such an investment of finances and human resources,” says Noltemy. “We are always looking for ways to be more efficient and streamlined.”

Although the Classical Companion has generated some ticket sales, “Existing audiences are not using it as much as we had hoped,” says Noltemy. “We want to know what they think of the interactive component, which requires a lot of time, energy, and money.” Staff members hope that further study will help determine where to best place their efforts. Given the positive response so far, for example, could the podcasts fill the educational role of Classical Companion?

“We’d like to find out what interests people who are using podcasts,” says Noltemy. Even after the conclusion of the Wallace funding for enhancement of digital media, the BSO will continue to track new communications modes and developments in digital technology. “The type of people who use podcasts would also use other multimedia functions,” she says, echoing her sentiment that the BSO intends to stake its claim on the ever-developing digital frontier.

Staying
current with
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contemporary.”

– Kim Noltemy

WORKSHOP

Online Lessons for Arts and Culture: Tactics to Drive Community Participation

“Ten years ago, access to the Internet was limited and web sites couldn’t be trusted,” Rich Mintz told the Participation Learning Network at a meeting on March 4, 2010, “but now the Internet is everywhere. For the foreseeable future, your first encounters with new constituents will be by the Internet.”

Mintz is the Vice President of Strategy for Blue State Digital. The agency was founded in 2004 to “build online communities that take action and drive meaningful results,” as Mintz puts it. Blue State Digital is best known for managing online fundraising and constituency-building for Barack Obama’s 2008 presidential campaign.

Mintz, who began his career in direct mail marketing, stressed that online communication is no different from other forms of communication—it just moves more quickly. “Your common sense, combined with knowledge of your organization will steer you in the right direction,” he assured his audience. “Relationships drive action,” he said. “How do you create a sense of community so that people feel compelled to do more for your organization?”

“For the foreseeable future, your first encounters with new constituents will be by the Internet.”

– Rich Mintz

Successful constituency-building is based on timely messages and persuasive storytelling. “Short and timely e-mails are most effective,” Mintz said. “If I can’t figure out in five seconds why you are talking to me, the communication is a failure.”

Messages should build an ongoing narrative about the organization. “What people connect to is your humanity,” Mintz said. He advises organizations to find ways to empower constituents. “Give people something to do besides donating money,” he said. Examples might include adding testimony, engaging in advocacy, completing a poll, or sending a message to a friend. “People are most excited about your organization at the moment that they have taken an action to support you,” he explained. “Make sure that everyone understands that they are implicated in your success.”

Terms of Engagement

Huntington Theatre Company builds stage for online community

“The world has changed in terms of new media and we want to keep current,” says Huntington Theatre Company Director of Marketing Temple Gill, explaining why the organization chose to direct its Wallace Foundation grant to enhancing its two web sites.

The intent of the project went well beyond equipping the web sites with the latest technological bells and whistles. Rather, the Huntington sought to set the stage for an online community, using its Internet presence to deepen the engagement of current patrons while reaching out to potential new audiences.



Like many performing arts organizations, the Huntington has experienced a decrease in subscribers at the same time that single ticket purchases have increased. Arts consumers enjoy an increasing number of options, Gill says, and “we hope to increase their feeling of commitment to the Huntington.” Recognizing technology’s potential to foster a sense of connection between patrons and the company, she says, “We want to build a community online.”



The Huntington converted to a new web site (www.huntingtontheatre.org) in 2004. In that same year, the company launched a second web site (www.bostontheatrescene.com) to support programming at the Stanford Calderwood Pavilion at the Boston Center for the Arts. The Calderwood serves as an additional stage for Huntington productions and offers rehearsal and performance space for other companies. When the Wallace funds became available, “it had been three years,” says Gill. “We knew there was more work to do on both web sites, but it was not in the budget. We had put off needed changes and updates.”

In addition to making the web sites more user-friendly, the Huntington added such features as staff blogs, an audience blog called “Join the Conversation,” and behind-the-scenes videos. “We are a living, breathing art form,” says Gill. “The videos better encapsulate what we do.” Referring to Alan Brown’s concept of value-based marketing (see page 62), Gill also notes that the web site includes testimonials from audience members who share their experiences in their own words.

“The experience caused a sea change in our organization. ... The project sparked a fire of data collection.”

– Temple Gill



To further create a sense of immediacy, the company began to offer podcasts (available through the web site or iTunes) that might provide a peek at the first day of rehearsal or document a forum discussion among actors and audience members. “It’s another facet of the Huntington experience that we can share with our audience and potential audience,” says Gill. “It’s also something that we can manage and afford.” To increase efficiency and minimize costs, the company is producing much of the new content in-house.

By the third year of the project, visits to both the Huntington and Boston Theatre Scene web sites had increased by more than 25 percent, but Google Analytics revealed that the enhanced content had less influence on ticket sales than staff had expected. Rather than seeking more information to help them decide whether or not to buy tickets, web users generally accessed the new features after they had made their purchase.

“So much of this effort is hard to tie back to sales,” Gill acknowledges, “but it feels valuable. I have to believe that increased engagement online leads to increased engagement in person.”

The number of pageviews of each web site also increased at the same time, suggesting greater interest in the content. The quantitative data were encouraging, but the Huntington also sought qualitative information about what the users thought of the pages they viewed. As part of the Wallace grant, S. Radoff Associates (www.sradoff.com) conducted a web user survey. It revealed that users regarded the existing content favorably and did not feel a need for suggested new features such as online chats with artists.

Ninety-seven percent of survey respondents rated the “Select Your Own Seats” module for ticket-buyers as the top web site improvement. “Since we added that, the percent of web site sales has increased from 31 percent to 43 percent,” says Gill, “It really empowered our online users.”

Moreover, the seat-selection feature helped the Huntington to better reach potential patrons in the under-40 demographic. (According to Gill, the typical Huntington Theatre subscriber is a 55 year-old woman who loves the arts.) “Making it easier to buy tickets online will increase sales in general,” she says, “but will also increase sales to younger professionals.” Over the course of three years, sales of \$25 tickets offered only to patrons age 35 and under, increased from 300 to 5,500.

The most revealing information about audiences was uncovered in a data mining study conducted by Elliott Marketing Group, which analyzed almost 900,000 ticket transactions conducted by the Huntington and the nine other companies that sell tickets for pro-

PHOTO BY DON WEST



ductions at the Calderwood Pavilion through bostontheatrescene.com.

“We discovered that the audiences are basically the same at both locales,” says Gill, “but we did have a lightbulb moment. We discovered that none of us were doing a good job of attracting patrons back.”

The study revealed that 59 percent of Huntington patrons were making only one purchase in a five-year period. The numbers were even more discouraging for some of the smaller companies.

“We spend so much time trying to attract new audiences,” says Gill. “John Elliott advised us to concentrate on the people in our house. They are our captive audience.”

The Huntington has acted on that advice with a strategy Gill calls “four walls marketing.” As a first step, she says, “we want to improve the ways in which we make use of people’s time while we’ve got them.” The Huntington has placed giant television screens in the lobbies at both venues to display short snippets of infor-



mation about the evening's production and to entice patrons with glimpses of other current and upcoming productions. Audience members are invited to join post-show conversations after most performances. The program book has also expanded to include more information about the theater company, its staff, and the people who support and benefit from it.

Improvements to the web site have also enabled staff to extend patrons' theater-going experience by sending targeted e-mail messages both before and after the productions. The messages can be tailored to specific constituents, such as subscribers, donors, single ticket buyers, and first-time single ticket buyers. Pre-show reminder messages contain news about the production and logistical information about the venue. "We have very high open and click-through rates—up to 60 percent," says Gill. "We want to drive people to content on the web site. This is about communication, not sales, but we do hope that enhanced feelings of loyalty and commitment will lead to sales."

Patrons also receive an e-mail message following the performance to thank them for attending and to encourage them to post a comment on the blog. The message may also contain special offers, such as reduced price tickets to encourage single ticket buyers to attend another production. So far, the response to this offer has been limited. "I want to talk to those who aren't returning and ask them what it would take to bring them back," says Gill, noting that the Huntington plans to continue to test discount offers and will also conduct a survey of one-time-buyers to learn more about their behaviors.

Increasingly, key decisions at the Huntington proceed from such concrete information. "One of the biggest changes in our organization as a result of the Wallace grant has been our constant reference back to data to drive our decision-making," says Gill, "rather than relying on assumptions or anecdotal information." An interdepartmental team created to evaluate the market research data and guide the implementation of the funded projects has now become integral to organizational operations.

"The experience caused a sea change in our organization," says Gill, noting that "the project sparked a fire of data collection throughout the entire company." Gill has already been drafted to take the communication and testing strategies developed for marketing and apply them to donor development.

"Data collection seems so obvious now," Gill says, "but it is not necessarily ingrained in arts organizations."

Deepening Engagement through Education and Relationships

Several Participation Learning Network (PLN) presentations focused on audience members' desire for more meaningful arts experiences. PLN members responded by crafting projects that identified audience members' interests and cultivated deeper personal connections. Other program enhancements offered insights into the artistry and prompted further discussion and reflection.



Beyond the Libretto

Opera Boston flourishes through personal engagement

“We always ask, what are the expectations for a satisfying artistic experience?”

– William Chapman

In many ways, Opera Boston was in an enviable position when the Participation Learning Network (PLN) was launched. By consolidating gains made over several seasons, the company had reached its capacity in terms of numbers of subscribers and had built a good deal of loyalty among that subscriber base.

Yet the lack of a permanent facility left Opera Boston with limited opportunities for audience expansion in the near future. Facing this reality, the company crafted a careful strategy that made securing the enlarged audience base a priority, but at the same time laid the groundwork for longer term audience growth.

Founded in 1982 as the Boston Academy of Music, the company is known for its innovative repertoire choices that include important but rarely presented works. Opera Boston has long realized that its adventurous programming must be supported by a strong educational component, even for audience members already familiar with the art form. Director of Marketing and Development William Chapman also acknowledges that opera can seem intimidating. “Part of our outreach strategy,” he says, “is to make opera ‘safe’ for younger and more diverse populations.”

Sensitivity to audience needs is at the core of the company’s efforts. “We always ask, what are the expectations for a satisfying artistic experience?” says Chapman. The answer, at least in

part, came from audience surveys that revealed that patrons wanted a greater context for their experience in the theater and were eager for more opportunities to engage with the productions and with each other.

The PLN project provided both the impetus and the funds to put long-discussed plans for enhanced communication into action. The timing was opportune, according to Marketing Manager Gillian Morrison. The company was about to embark on a more unfamiliar season which included the local premiere of a “difficult” opera, *The Nose* by Dmitri Shostakovich.

A portion of PLN funding was dedicated to a year-long redesign and overhaul of the web site (operaboston.org) and to the creation of new educational content, including study guides for upcoming productions and feature articles commissioned from Richard Dyer, the former classical music critic of the *Boston Globe*. The web site also has links to librettos and cast biographies as well as an online shop. It can now be updated easily and maintained and expanded by staff.

Click-through analysis has shown that the online resources are popular destinations on the web site and increasing reliance on this means of communication has helped to minimize the impact of budget cuts. The company had originally planned to provide printed copies of the study guides, for example, but saved money by



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issuing them as web-only exclusives. Staff were delighted to see patrons arriving for productions of *The Nose* with printouts of the study guide in hand. (Initial concerns proved to be unfounded: The opera played to 98 percent attendance, making it the second highest grossing performance in the company's history.)

To respond to audience members' interest in greater interaction, Opera Boston also used PLN funds to support its well-received program of pre-performance lectures. Each of the nine lectures during the 2008-09 season attracted about 300 opera-goers, a significant increase over the 100 attendees each at the first lecture series introduced about six years ago.

Richard Dyer also hosted post-performance "talkbacks," which were inspired by Dr. Lynne

Conner's presentation to PLN members (see page 47). About 200 patrons remained after three Sunday matinee performances to observe Dyer's interviews with directors and performers and then to join in the discussion. The popularity of these events continued to grow during the second year of PLN funding, with up to 600 people at some of the pre-performance lectures.



Opera Boston hopes to increase its performance schedule in the next several seasons, making audience growth and diversification a priority in the company's next five-year strategic plan. Several PLN-supported initiatives provided enhanced benefits for current patrons while

Der Freischütz

"The Marksman"



also serving as important outreach tools. "We don't want to win new audience members at the expense of losing our base," says Chapman.

Opera Boston performs at the Cutler Majestic Theatre, owned by Emerson College and located in the heart of Boston's Theater District. Pre-season open houses to introduce the companies that perform in the restored 1901 theater have provided valuable opportunities to collect names for the mailing list and to demystify opera on a person-to-person basis, addressing what staff refer to as the "objections to opera attendance," such as questions about etiquette, dress and language, as well as a more general unease about "fitting in."

"Our mission is to have opera be treated the same as theater and not as an obscure form," says Chapman.

The new initiative that has perhaps generated the most excitement is the Invited Dress Rehearsal. In an inspired gesture of outreach, members of the Friends Circle are invited to dress rehearsals along with the constituents of local education and social service organizations. The invitation to attend a rehearsal of a sold-out production—and to meet with artistic staff and performers—has proven a very effective means to introduce new audiences to opera under less intimidating circumstances. Opera Boston has extended invitations to the Boston Living Center, ONEin3 Boston, the Boston Children's Chorus, New England Conservatory, the Boston Arts Academy, and Boston University.

During the first year, about 1,200 people attended four dress rehearsals, with the number of new attendees far exceeding the benchmark figure of 150 per event. For the following season, Opera Boston also gave Friends Circle members the opportunity to invite their own friends to join them at a dress rehearsal. While Opera Boston hopes that the number of Friends Circle attendees will continue to grow, they have already seen a 179 percent growth in Friends Circle membership.

Opera Boston continues to employ a multifaceted communication strategy. The print newsletter, *The Score*, is mailed to 5,000 households and serves a valuable role as a vehicle of information about the organization itself and the many supporters—volunteers, board members, overseers—who help make it tick. Chapman acknowledges that the web site is "more dynamic, yet cyclical, with greatest traffic tied to productions." The company has embraced social media as a means to reach potential new audiences.

From the web site, visitors can link directly to Opera Boston's Facebook page updates. The company launched its Facebook page in April 2009 with an advertising campaign targeted to college-age people who like opera. Of its current 1,400 friends, about 34 percent are in the 25- to 34-year-old demographic.

"I don't know how to turn them into opera fanatics," says Chapman, "but you first have to get their attention and gain a little bit of mind share."

In fact, a younger and more non-traditional community has begun to form around Opera Boston Underground. The initiative was launched in January 2007 when a small group of up-and-coming Opera Boston singers performed an evening of Kurt Weill repertoire at the Lizard Lounge in Cambridge. Successful from the first event, Opera Boston Underground presents "casual opera" to about 100 people per performance. Though a small number of Opera Boston's more traditional audience members also attend the Underground events, the Lizard Lounge crowd tends to be younger and more ethnically diverse than the audiences at the Cutler Majestic Theatre. (According to Morrison, the typical Opera Boston member is a 50-year-old, suburban woman.)

Chapman admits that he has neither the capacity nor the inclination to determine whether Opera Boston Underground is serving as a feeder to the established season of performances. "I am looking to change attitudes about opera rather than add names to a mailing list," he says, noting that "these people are experiencing opera as fun. They don't want to feel as if they are part of an experiment."

Opera Boston does, however, recognize the value of data analysis in its outreach efforts. "If I had the money I would jump at the chance to conduct focus groups to delve into specific segments of our audience," says Chapman. The company is particularly interested in younger audience members' attitudes about opera in general and Opera Boston in particular. While focus groups are not feasible at this point, staff have established a SurveyMonkey account and may try to use it to learn more about how younger audience members become aware of the company.

Some things are already clear. The PLN-supported initiatives helped to "validate what we know about our audience," says Chapman. "They don't want tote bags and parties. They want information and to know about the art form."

"Our mission is to have opera be treated the same as theater and not as an obscure form."

– William Chapman

Communicating the Value and Benefit of Arts Participation

We are inundated by sophisticated marketing messages,” Alan Brown told Participation Learning Network members and other cultural organizations at a forum on June 27, 2007. A principal at the WolfBrown consulting firm, Brown studies audience behavior and patterns of cultural participation.

“Television ads take ordinary products and make them relevant,” he said. “We actually have the programs that change people’s lives, but we don’t know how to talk about them yet.”

Cultural organizations are accustomed to evaluating performance in terms of income and attendance, Brown observed. “But so much hinges on our ability to think and talk about art in terms of value.”

Speaking to the group of artistic and executive directors, marketing managers, and development staff, Brown emphasized that conveying value is not a simple matter of designing “sexy” brochures and writing pithy copy. It’s an organization-wide process of awareness and communication. “Start a conversation about value and benefits,” he said. “What impacts do you want to create? Create your own value compact and then live it and breathe it.”

“You have a product that affords people a glimpse of their own potential as human beings.”

– Alan Brown

Many benefits—such as economic development, lowering school dropout rates, preserving cultural heritage, or promoting respect for diversity—accrue over time and enhance a larger community. At the same time, “one experience can change a person and last a lifetime,” Brown said.

“What you are selling is not an artist, a work of art, or an exhibition. You are selling imagination, renewal, better relationships,” he said. “You have a product that affords people a glimpse of their own potential as human beings. There is no greater gift.”

Moreover, Brown believes that people are looking for connection. “Unlocking social value is the greatest promise of increasing participation,” he said. “What do people get at a live performance that they can’t get digitally?”

Even in uncertain financial times, Brown sees potential. “If people understand the compelling value in your programs, they will be lined up outside your door.”

Face to Face

World Music builds on the quest to understand

Since its founding in 1990, World Music has lived up to its name, bringing performers from more than 70 countries to share their cultural and artistic heritage through music and dance.

Now called World Music/CRASHarts, the company continues to present world music and dance as well as contemporary dance, music, and theater.

In one season alone, World Music might feature throat singers from Tuva, tango dancers from Argentina, traditional and contemporary musicians from Mali, a string band from North Carolina, an urban Gypsy band from Belgrade, a Cape Verdean chanteuse, and contemporary dance companies from the United States and abroad. Driven by its mission to introduce often unfamiliar artists and art forms to greater Boston audiences and by its commitment to forge connections between those audiences and artists, World Music has a long history of creating education and outreach programs for both students and adults.

But Founder and Executive Director Maure Aronson acknowledges that funding cutbacks had forced World Music to largely curtail its learning programs. When the organization joined the Participation Learning Network (PLN), Aronson saw the opportunity to reinstate programs that would support audience members in their “quest to understand an arts event.”



PHOTO BY JULIE ROBERTS

Drawing from past experience, World Music developed a range of activities that would be “uncomplicated and cost-effective and that we could implement without having to hire more staff,” says Aronson. (The organization has six full-time staff members.)

In her Project Brief for the Heinz Endowments' Arts Experience Initiative, Dr. Lynne Conner (see page 47) notes, "Effective enrichment programming is made up of a series of small, interwoven, multi-layered experiences serving a variety of learning styles." She further suggests that "organizations truly committed to creating an audience-centered culture will invest in a variety of enrichment styles and structures."

World Music's PLN-funded initiatives were a model of this multi-pronged approach. For greatest impact in using limited funds, the bulk of the educational efforts centered around the dance programming. "When you deal with an abstract form like dance, a couple of pointers can help you to engage," says Aronson. "Dance is a form for which people want to get some pointers on how to look at it. It's like looking at a painting."

World Music was able to publicize its array of educational opportunities through its ongoing means of communication. The schedule was included in about 120,000 season brochures and upcoming events were highlighted in 60,000



concert programs. The organization inserted flyers into ticket mailings and sent postcards to a 20,000-person mailing list. The web site featured a link to learning opportunities and reminders were sent by e-mail to ticket-buyers.

In almost all cases, audience response met or exceeded expectations. Visiting artists led master classes for students at the Boston Arts Academy, the Boston Conservatory, and the Harvard University Dance

Program. A free tango lecture/demonstration at the New England Conservatory drew 200 participants, while five flamenco dance classes for the public were all filled to capacity. Audience members stayed in their seats after dance performances for discussions with artists and artistic directors.

Aronson finds particular resonance in those activities that allow people to make a personal connection with an artist. For example, about 40 people attended a workshop by members of Huun Huur Tu, the Tuvan Throat Singers, and had the opportunity to "have a throat singing master touch your throat," he says. In addition, about 70 people attended a pre-performance gathering with Malian kora player Toumani Diabaté. "You really got close to an artist, got to talk to him and shake his hand. This was really personal."

PLN funding enabled World Music to not only revive some tried-and-true educational models, but also to initiate its first-ever series of pre-concert discussions. Long-time Boston arts writer Debra Cash was engaged to present a talk before every dance performance. In planning the series, Cash drew on her previous experience as scholar-in-residence at Jacob's Pillow Dance in Becket. "What I learned at the Pillow is that even with a very educated dance audience, people were so grateful to have a way into the work," she says.

Noting that the art form of dance has a relatively low public profile in general, Cash saw her discussions as an opportunity to place each company in historic and aesthetic context and offer viewers guidance on what to especially watch for in the works that they would be seeing. Cash also

oversaw a dance-related blog on World Music's web site.

"In a community like Boston, people are used to being competent and sophisticated," she says. "To feel inadequate is a disservice to the audience and the art. I try to help audience members feel more competent in their experience and their own perceptions."

The logistics of the performing venues made it impossible to present the pre-performance discussions in a casual setting with wine and cheese as World Music had originally envisioned. Nonetheless, Aronson admits to being pleasantly surprised by the high level of interest in these events. During the first year of the project, he anticipated that about 300 people would attend eight to ten discussions. In the end, 2,135 people attended 28 discussions (27 of which were dance-related).

"I was surprised how the audience continued to build," he says. "What encouraged me to proceed was that the numbers never tailed off—they continued to increase. It was a real indicator that people want to participate." In fact, the momentum continued to build during the second year of funding. "It was phenomenal," says Aronson. "You could not get a seat. There were at least 30 people standing at every event." During the second year of funding, several of the discussions were led by one of the performing artists, rather than by Cash, with no noticeable difference in the number of attendees.

Cash notes that there was a "real pent-up interest" in dance activities. She observed a lot of repeat listeners at her pre-concert discussions. In one instance an audience member told her that the pre-concert discussion was the tipping factor that led her to select the World Music performance over another event. "She thought that the talk would enable her to have a richer experience," Cash relates.

World Music has been able to track attendance figures, but did not have the staffing capacity to oversee an audience survey to measure more concretely the effect of enhanced programming in motivating single ticket buyers or building organizational loyalty through new subscriptions or memberships.

Nonetheless, says Aronson, "People are very receptive to being educated about what they are going to see. It's a valuable lesson to learn."

Without additional funding, World Music will not be able to continue its enhanced educational programming. Aronson is hopeful that the strong track record that World Music has built with support from the PLN will be persuasive when he approaches other funding agencies.

He will not, however, be seeking additional funds for the dance-related blog. World Music had made a relatively conservative projection that 200 people would read and post blogs during the first season. Cash made concerted efforts to promote online communication and to spark discussion through a series of questions. But, in the end, only 67 people left blog entries. Cash theorizes that a dance audience member who wanted to comment on a performance would be more likely to go directly to the web site or Facebook page of the company itself.

Although World Music has a presence on Facebook and Twitter, Aronson decided that staff did not have the time to invest in making the blog successful and he pulled the plug after the first season. "Our audiences like to talk to someone face to face," says Aronson. "There's still something to be said for it."



PHOTO BY EDGAR DE SOUZA

"People are very receptive to being educated about what they are going to see. It's a valuable lesson to learn."

– Maure Aronson

Taking Hold

Arsenal Center for the Arts carves out community identity

More than a decade of grassroots effort went into the making of the Arsenal Center for the Arts. When it opened in 2005 in a former U.S. Army arsenal in Watertown, the center rode a wave of community support and enthusiasm.

But staff turnover and intermittent programming sapped the center's early promise and momentum. With Participation Learning Network (PLN) funding, the center sought to reconnect with its early supporters and to continue to define its role in the community. "We are a start-up organization," says Program Director Beverly Snow. "We are such a new organization that nobody quite understands who we are."

The 30,000-square-foot arts center includes two theaters, classrooms, workshops, artists' studios, and gallery and exhibition space. It houses three resident companies (including New Repertory Theatre, see page 68) and has the potential to become a significant community resource.

Yet outreach by phone and mail to early patrons and supporters yielded only mixed results and staff realized, "it would be better to concentrate on who's walking through the door now," says Snow. "We are trying to learn what kinds of programs people want."

Children's programs, including an extensive summer educational series, have begun to attract a family-oriented audience. "Now we are working on building the 30-year-old-and-up audience," says Executive Director Sharon Glennon, who was hired during the last phase of the PLN grant.

TRANSFORMATIONS

Sept 9 - Oct 30, 2010
Opening Reception:
Thursday, September 16
5:30-7:30pm

Kathy Halamka
Gary Duehr
Natacha Sochat
Gail Martin
Margaret Hart
Jay Bordage
Kelly Anona Kerrigan

Gallery Hours: Tue-Sun, 12-6pm
8pm on performance nights

arsenal center for the arts 321 Arsenal St. Watertown, MA
www.arsenalarts.org

Gail Martin

Kathy Halamka

Gary Duehr

A simple survey handed out at both adult and family-oriented programs has been key to identifying patrons and their interests. The center has collected data about patrons' patterns of attendance, program preferences, and chief sources of information about arts events. Incentives, such as free tickets, have encouraged audience members to provide their names and contact information.

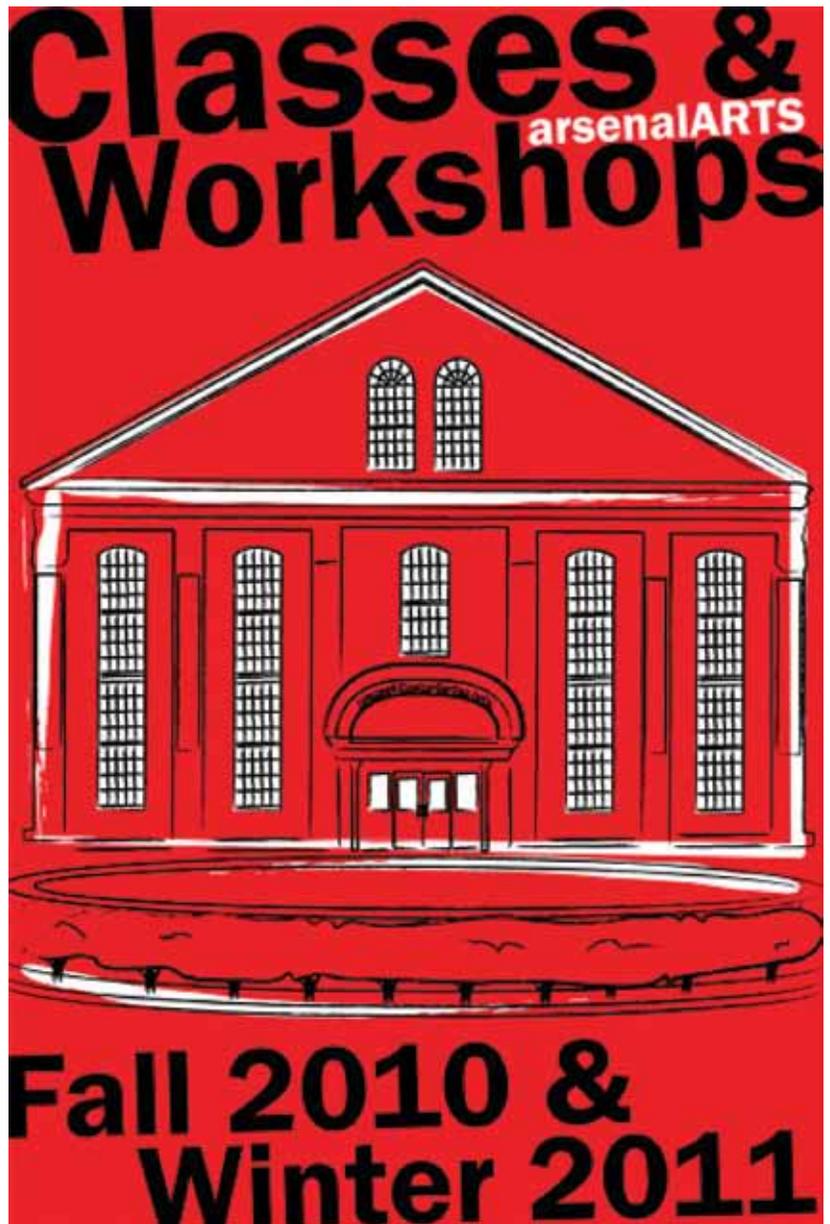
Both Glennon and Snow note that conducting the survey has been a valuable process. "The survey helped us develop a friendly face for our organization," says Snow. "We greeted people at the door and got an opportunity to talk with our patrons. We are still selling the building as much as the programming, showing people that it is a friendly, accessible place."

Moreover, observes Glennon, "People say things to our staff that they might not put in a survey."

To receive news of upcoming events, patrons were encouraged to provide their e-mail addresses. They were also assured that they would receive only two or three mailings a month. To further refine communication, a newly hired marketing staff person will use the survey information to help target e-blasts to patrons' interests.

The numbers are encouraging. The e-mail list has grown to 8,000 names, a 2,500 increase in a year. During the same time period, memberships increased from 325 to 450.

The center will continue to survey its patrons once the PLN grant is concluded. "A lesson we have learned is that it is best to collect data early," says Snow. "We didn't start until the center was four years old. We could have built on the early audience and not lost people who were so enthusiastic early on."



"The survey helped us develop a friendly face."

– Beverly Snow

Change of Venue

New Repertory Theatre weathers transitions through innovative communication

“We had great audience loyalty in our old space. ... We didn’t want to lose that in our new space.”

– Mark Soucy

Few organizations face as many changes in a five-year period as the New Repertory Theatre. The company was well-prepared for the first upheaval: a 2005 move from its Newton base to the Arsenal Center for the Arts in Watertown.

“We were one of the driving forces in getting the space open,” says former Development Manager Mark Soucy, noting the company’s role in designing the 340-seat main stage as well as a 90-seat black box theater. “We knew that when we moved into the new facility we would see an upward spike in audience based on curiosity,” he says, “but that it would be followed by a decrease.”

To address the anticipated audience fluctuation, New Rep sought the advice of a development consultant. Funding from the Participation Learning Network (PLN) enabled the company to craft the recommendations into a “Personal Touch Initiative” aimed at maintaining and strengthening relationships with both audience members and donors.

“We had great audience loyalty in our old space,” says Soucy. “Intimacy and personal connections were a big factor and we didn’t want to lose that in our new space.” During the first year of the PLN project, New Rep was able to introduce a series of appreciation and cultivation events for donors, including receptions at intermission, closing night parties, and other behind-



the-scenes opportunities. First-time ticket buyers and subscribers were contacted by phone or letter to thank them for their attendance.

New Rep also enlisted students from Bentley College to conduct audience surveys and focus groups in March 2008. This first feedback following the relocation revealed that the audience demographic was little changed and that “audiences liked the programming and the accessibility of staff members,” says Marketing and Public Relations Manager Gia Podobinski.

Hard figures supported the assessments. New Rep exceeded its goal of attracting 200 unconverted trialists to a second production and noted modest increases in subscription returns from audience members who received thank you

letters. The company even increased the number of giving levels (and raised the top level from \$10,000 to \$75,000) and saw at least one donor step into each of the higher categories.

But New Rep's forward momentum hit a serious bump in August 2008 when Artistic Director Rick Lombardo announced that he would be leaving the company at the end of the 2008-09 season. The timing forced New Rep to postpone the launch of a major gift campaign. At the same time, the economic downturn led to a decrease in ticket sales.

"Our PLN project helped us bridge the gap during the leadership transition," says Soucy. "The driving force for year two was the transition to a new artistic director and our PLN communications strategies were more important than ever." New Rep continued to build relationships with donors and prospects. The company even invited major institutional and individual donors to receptions with the two finalist candidates for artistic director. When Kate Warner was selected as new Artistic Director, New Rep developed a plan to introduce her to all of their constituencies during her inaugural 2009-10 season.

"What's been great about the PLN is the opportunity to assess what's working and what's not and to change direction. We really needed that flexibility to handle the leadership transition," says Podobinski. "The PLN also helped us learn about our audiences."

Staff were surprised, for example, to learn that almost half their patrons purchase their tickets online. "Our audience is more of an older demographic," Podobinski says. "We had assumed that electronic communication would

not be the best way to engage them. We found out that we were wrong and now we are putting more emphasis on social media." Feedback also revealed that patrons preferred follow-up communication by e-mail rather than by mail or phone calls.

"Thank you calls are becoming 'white noise,'" Podobinski says, "but I'm seeing a return on social media." The New Rep web site has begun to post videos of patrons' reactions at opening night. "Our audience values word of mouth," she says. For the 2009-10 season the company also held a contest to select five "New Rep reviewers" who attend the press openings and post a blog on the New Rep web site within 48 hours.

As New Rep neared the close of Warner's first season, subscription renewals had stabilized near 77 percent, close to the company's historic high of about 80 percent in the previous space. The number of first-time donors continued to climb and Podobinski remained focused on converting repeat ticket buyers to subscribers.

"I've seen an increase in people using the web site," she notes. She's especially pleased with the strong response to new podcast chats that introduce listeners to some of the artistic staff involved in the productions.

"The PLN taught us to spend time strategizing how to best use our existing resources," says Soucy.

Podobinski concurs. "It's very easy to be reactionary," she says. "But the PLN allowed us to think strategically about how to respond to a problem and about how to sustain any changes that we were going to implement."

"I'm seeing a return on social media... Our audience values word of mouth."

– Gia Podobinski

Peak: How Great Companies Get Their Mojo From Maslow

Businessman Chip Conley founded Joie de Vivre Hotels in San Francisco in 1987 and has also served on a number of arts boards in the Bay area. “I understand the challenges of running arts organizations from the board perspective,” he told Participation Learning Network members and other cultural organizations at a forum on May 8, 2009.

Conley also understands how the theories he developed to help grow his company into the largest boutique hotel collection in California can be applied to arts organizations.

“During the last downturn I got reacquainted with a theory of human motivation behavior that really opened my eyes to how any organization can use basic psychology to meet the needs and higher needs of the people we come into contact with,” he said.

Conley distilled Dr. Abraham Maslow’s hierarchy of needs from five levels to three: physiological and safety needs; social belonging and esteem; and self actualization. He found this construct equally relevant to creating a motivated work force or satisfied hotel guests and believes that it can also help cultural organizations connect more deeply with audience members.

At the base of the pyramid, audience members are seeking entertainment, while

Arts organizations “are in a business that has the potential to be transformative.”

– Chip Conley

at the middle level, they seek emotional fulfillment. At the top of the pyramid, audience members hope to be transformed—by seeing the world in a new way, perhaps, or reaching a new depth of emotion.

“An appreciation for the purity and power of beauty” can also be transformative, said Conley, noting that “at the top of the pyramid is where magic happens. When you create an experience that addresses your customer’s unrecognized needs, you are going to create an evangelical customer who will go out and talk about you.”

Joie de Vivre, in fact, spends less than 1 percent of annual revenues on advertising, choosing instead to create positive buzz through high customer satisfaction. In all customer relations, Conley said, “the biggest response and word of mouth comes from those that are the least and the most satisfied.”

Arts organizations, he said, “have the potential to have customers who love to talk about you because you are in a business that has the potential to be transformative.”

Chip Conley is the author of Peak: How Great Companies Get Their Mojo from Maslow (Jossey-Bass, 2007). For a broadcast of this forum, see the WGBH Forum Network web site, <http://forum-network.org/>.

Sharing Mastery, One Note at a Time

From the Top nurtures musical citizenship

Though based in Boston, From the Top is national in scope. Since its weekly radio broadcast on NPR was launched in 2000, about 2,000 young classical musicians from almost every state have performed in concert halls across the country. Broadcast on about a third of the stations in the nationwide NPR network, the concerts reach 700,000 listeners weekly.

The Wallace Excellence Award enabled From the Top to focus on its home community while also honing its model of community service for its young musicians. “Our mission is to increase participation in the arts,” says Jenny Meyburg, Education Program Manager. “It was a natural fit.”

Through a four-year program with third through fifth grade students in three Boston elementary schools, From the Top sought to influence students’ attitudes about classical music and to encourage them to participate in their schools’ instrumental music programs. The effort included transportation for parents and students to live tapings at Jordan Hall at the New England Conservatory as well as extensive resource materials for teachers, students, and parents.

The heart of the Boston program consisted of classroom visits by young performers in advance of their concerts at Jordan Hall. “These talented young musicians have such power to



“Talented young musicians have such power to influence others.”

– Linda Gerstle

influence others,” says Linda Gerstle, Director of Education and Community Partnerships. “As the program developed, we realized that this is the real story.”

To enable greater interaction between the elementary school students and musician role models, From the Top developed an Alumni Fellowship through the Outreach Performance Program at the New England Conservatory (NEC). Four From the Top alumni doing undergraduate work at NEC or Harvard received small stipends to visit the schools several times during the school year; in some cases they provided small-group training for students playing the same instrument. “Students who receive focused instruction from a musician who is trained in their instrument are more likely to continue their music studies,” says Gerstle.

“The biggest learning from the grant is that our focus should be on leadership training.”

– Linda Gerstle

Violinist Audrey Wright became a fellow during her first year at NEC. “We get great responses from the students,” she says. “They blow me away with their insightful questions about what kind of work goes into being a musician.”

Because each school tracked participation in music programs differently, it proved difficult to determine if the From the Top program made an impact on participation levels. But attendance at Jordan Hall concerts increased by 70 percent and surveys of both teachers and students provided encouraging feedback. One teacher noted, “The students get really excited at seeing young performers and listening to their stories. ... If they can do it, our kids feel empowered that they can do it too with hard work.” A student was more succinct: “They were cool. Made me want to play that instrument.”

Gerstle says, “It would have been useful to do individual student tracking to provide more insight.” But an evaluation consultant observed that, over the course of the program, students asked more sophisticated questions, often focusing on technical aspects of playing an instrument or professional careers in music.

“The students got a lot out of it,” says Wright. “Maybe some of them will go on to be great musicians.”

Gerstle says, however, “The most powerful change was from the From the Top kids who were doing the in-school visits. It has changed the whole focus of our education department here.”

Meyburg concurs. “We saw the most significant change with our college-age mentors. Participating in the program has changed their world perspective and their career perspective.”

Wright, for example, was raised in a family that placed a lot of emphasis on the arts. “But not all kids get exposure to classical music,” she says. “I plan on becoming a professional musician, but I will continue to be a full supporter of community outreach. It’s also good for me as a musician. It helps me connect with audiences so much more easily.”

As From the Top enters its second decade, the experience of the Wallace Excellence Award has brought clarification and new purpose to its efforts to increase participation in the arts. “The biggest learning from the grant is that our focus should be on leadership training,” says Gerstle, noting that From the Top has realized that the organization’s role is not to serve as music educators nor to provide public schools with regular music education.

While From the Top plans to continue the Alumni Fellowship with NEC, the new insights will have national rather than simply local impact. “This experience has inspired us to think about what are meaningful partnerships so that we can provide our musicians with an array of opportunities to develop,” Gerstle says. “Wallace has inspired us to extend our thinking about arts leadership and to place more emphasis on the power of peer-to-peer relationships. We hope to continue to train and inspire our performers to mentor those coming up behind them.”

PHOTO BY JOHN SERVIES



PHOTO COURTESY FROM THE TOP



PHOTO COURTESY FROM THE TOP

Broad Institutional Change for Increased Capacity to Engage

During the course of the Participation Learning Network, several organizations experienced changes in leadership or facilities. During a time of transition, organizations relied on PLN projects to reinforce efforts to identify and serve new constituents and to support new programming initiatives.



New Look, New Goals

Reinforcing institutional change at the Harvard Art Museums

The timing couldn't have been better. The Harvard Art Museums joined the Participation Learning Network (PLN) just as the institution was finalizing plans for a major renovation and expansion to bring the collections of its three museums under one roof.

But the changes at the Art Museums involve more than bricks and mortar. The building project is simply the most concrete aspect of what David Cole, the museums' former Director of Development and Strategic Initiatives, describes as a "cultural transformation" to broaden outreach to the Greater Boston community and beyond.

Working with architect Renzo Piano, the university plans to restore the 1927 building that houses the Fogg Art Museum's collection of Western art from the Middle Ages to the present. In addition, a new wing of galleries will be constructed for the Arthur M. Sackler Museum's deep holdings in ancient, Asian, Islamic and later Indian art as well as the Busch-Reisinger Museum's concentration of German art and other works from central and northern Europe.

With one of the largest art museum collections in the country, Harvard could have an impact well beyond the groves of academe. But since the Fogg Museum opened its doors in 1895, the Art Museums have focused most intently on their core mission of teaching and research,



rather than outreach. As the Art Museums look forward to the opening of the renovated building in 2013, they are also looking outward. Under the leadership of director Thomas Lentz, the museums' staff are engaged in "an unprecedented level of externally focused activity," says Cole.

With one of the largest art museum collections in the country, Harvard could have an impact well beyond the groves of academe.

As a start, the Art Museums and their resources will figure prominently in the revision of Harvard's undergraduate curriculum. "Students can learn to look more deeply at the world around them by studying works of art," says Cole. Exposure to a world-class art collection can provide the same benefit to those outside academia and, he says, "the museums have also made a commitment to enhance the resources they provide to the community at large."

By providing support for focused research and programs, the PLN is helping to reinforce the Art Museums' commitment to expand its institutional focus.

Staff from the museums' Visitor Services and Institutional Advancement departments began with the basic goal of creating a welcoming environment and positive initial impression for visitors. "We wanted to experiment with how to create the right experience for the visitor," says Sanja Cvjeticanin, Director of Visitor Services. "What kind of messages are we sending about what kind of institution we are? What is the visitor's experience in the first twenty feet? In the first twenty seconds?"

The initial plan was to train Harvard student "ambassadors" to greet people in the reception area and offer guidance about the museums. Ambassadors would be supplied with informational materials that delved more deeply into individual works of art. By enabling visitors to tailor their engagement with works of art to match their own interests, staff hoped to create a sense of personal discovery that would enhance the museum-going experience.

The program was scheduled to launch in spring 2008. "Midway through, we realized that

the project was too ambitious and might not serve our purposes," says Sonja Plesset, former Director of Institutional Support. "We realized that first we needed to really listen to visitors and learn what they wanted from their museum experience."

In their century-plus history, the Art Museums had never conducted an extensive qualitative audience survey. As a result, staff had no concrete information about visitors' experiences and perceptions. "We decided that an exit survey should be the first step, and that the results of the survey should guide us going forward," says Plesset.

Shortly before the building at 32 Quincy Street closed for renovation in June 2008, seven students conducted 132 exit surveys with museum visitors. The fifteen-question survey began with concrete questions such as residence and museum visitation patterns. More qualitative questions were designed to elicit more subjective opinions. They included the following: Why did you decide to come? What did you enjoy? What would have improved your visit? What would you change?

Almost half the respondents were out-of-town tourists, while the remainder were either students from Harvard and other local colleges, or residents of Cambridge and metropolitan Boston. In analyzing the surveys, staff looked not only for ways to enhance the museum-going experience, but also for clues that might identify impediments to visitation.

The surveys revealed that the museum can seem inhospitable. "People who don't know about art feel scared and intimidated," a visitor told the clipboard-wielding student. "We need to show them that the museum is a great place to hang

out, spend time in the courtyard, and look at art.”

It also became evident that fairly straightforward changes could send a message of greater welcome. A common thread throughout the responses was the call for better signage to lead visitors from Harvard Square to the museums at the edge of Harvard Yard and, once there, for better floor plans and signage within the museum.

Respondents also emphasized that basic comforts need to be addressed before an artistic epiphany can occur. In other words, make sure that the bathrooms are easy to find and provide enough places to sit and rest and study the art.

“We learned a lot about how the front of the house should look,” says Cvjeticanin. “We provided the results to the director to take into account when designing the new entrance experience.”

The survey also found that many respondents “find the museums intimate and accessible,” says Plesset, “but they are thirsty for ways to engage.” Responses pointed to a couple of key themes:

- “I would have loved to have been able to connect with the art I didn’t understand,” one visitor confided.
- “I could have learned more with an audio tour. Take me to key pieces in the collection and provide me with information,” another suggested.

The physical changes necessitated by the building project are providing the opportunity to experiment with educational materials and



approaches. While the building at 32 Quincy Street is closed for renovation, highlights from the collections of all three museums are on view at the Sackler Museum in its current location across the street. Curators relished the opportunity to juxtapose works from different eras and cultures in an all-encompassing exhibition called “Re-View.” New wall text gives visitors the background information they need to make their own comparisons and draw their own conclusions.

In fall 2009, the museum launched its first-ever audio guide—*Guide by Cell*—to accompany the exhibition. Positive visitor response has encouraged staff to plan for further development of the guide, including making it available in other languages. “We look at the Sackler as a laboratory,” says Cvjeticanin. “Now is the time to be creative in our efforts to engage new audiences. We want to learn as much as we can so we’ll be able to better serve visitors when the new building is opened.”

Apprenticing art connoisseurs

Harvard Art Museums' staff learned about the Citizen Schools initiative from fellow Participation Learning Network members and quickly realized that it could provide a valuable complement to existing programs for public school students.

According to Executive Director John Werner, Citizen Schools focuses on middle school students and seeks "to address the achievement gap between races and classes by maximizing the use of after-school time." The program enlists experts in a variety of fields to provide hands-on learning to reinforce classroom subjects.

"Citizen Schools has clear goals and a clear curriculum format to empower students and teach new skills," says Art Museums' educator Judy Murray. Moreover, she says, "middle schoolers are a group we want to reach, they are at a 'turning-point' age."

Beginning in fall 2008, about a dozen students in grades 6 to 8 from Edison Middle School in Brighton spent up to two hours a week at the museum. To sharpen their observation, communication, and critical thinking skills, they selected works of art and wrote the text for a handsome new brochure that serves as a guide to the museum for middle schoolers.

The students premiered the guide and welcomed family and friends to the galleries at a public event in December. The Edison school principal and teachers who attended were impressed with the new levels of confidence that the students displayed. "The students really felt ownership of the artworks they selected," Murray notes.

"We have developed apprentices as art connoisseurs," Werner remarked that evening. "The exposure bodes well for setting them up for success."

Murray was gratified by the growth in skills that she observed over the course of the project and regards the guide as a valuable resource for the middle school age group. She is also excited by the new level of collaboration between the museums' Education, Visitor Services, Institutional Advancement, and Design departments. "We were parallel universes," she says. "The program gave us a great opportunity to authentically work together."

As all observers of organizational dynamics are aware, achieving fundamental changes in behavior and priorities is an ongoing process. The Art Museums' priorities—teaching and research—had been tailored to its role as an academic institution. Expanding the museums' programs for the community, while continuing to serve university and scholarly constituencies, has prompted an ongoing reevaluation of university museums' responsibilities to multiple audiences.

Some of the more surprising responses from the exit survey gave staff a new perspective on the place of the museums in the public realm. "We learned that there are many people from Cambridge and beyond who adore the museums," says Plesset. "They come to see their favorite work and feel a real sense of ownership. We realized that the museums are a treasured resource for many people in the community."

To integrate a community engagement perspective into the priorities and goals of staff across the museums, a new cross-functional team has been put in place. It includes Cvjetanin and the museums' first-ever Director of Education, Ray Williams.

While staff build consensus and collaboration within the museums, PLN funds and networking opportunities have enabled them to build bridges in the community. "If you want to engage the public in a new way, you can't just broadcast a message," says Cole, "you have to build relationships person by person and organization by organization. There is no adequate substitute for making connections with people who have the ear of a potential new audience."

The Art Museums have completed a successful apprenticeship program with Citizen Schools (see page 78) and hope to secure funding to continue the partnership. Plans are underway for a collaboration with the Boston Mayor's Office of Arts, Tourism & Special Events for science education programming to support an ambitious new exhibition, "Prints and the Pursuit of Knowledge in Early Modern Europe," due to open in fall 2011.

PLN seed funding also helped launch a pilot program with the Massachusetts Alliance of Portuguese Speakers and Centro Latino to serve immigrants to the Boston area. The program draws on the museums' collections to enhance the development of English language skills and explore key themes in U.S. history and civics in preparation for citizenship examinations. Called "Engaging New Americans," the program has received additional funding from the National Endowment for the Arts, as well as support from local funders.

"We learned a great deal since we began the program," says Williams. "You have to be creative and disciplined to get maximum impact—and then capitalize on the momentum you've created."

Plesset and Cole anticipate that PLN "seed programs" will continue to grow, but that the legacy of the PLN will extend beyond specific programs. "Our experiences have provided concrete examples and institutional memory of new, smarter, better ways of meeting our goals for public engagement," says Cole. "The lessons will become part of the DNA of our organization."

"Our experiences have provided concrete examples and institutional memory of new, smarter, better ways of meeting our goals for public engagement."

– David Cole

Out of the Garret

Raw Art Works' new space engages the public

Since 1994 Raw Art Works has operated out of a handsome red brick building in Central Square in Lynn. It's here that art therapists help RAW kids express their experiences and emotions through art—a breakthrough that often helps them put those feelings into words. With a guiding philosophy of “NO MISTAKES—JUST ART,” RAW aims for nothing less than “to offer long-term intervention for kids on that scary edge of falling into a life of crime and emotional deprivation.”

More than 400 youth each year are drawn to RAW's roster of 37 arts programs. But, says Founder and Artistic Director Mary Flannery, “we were hidden on two upper floors.” The ongoing controlled chaos of adolescent creativity took place largely out of view of RAW's immediate neighbors and the general public.

When RAW purchased the building in 2006, they were finally able to establish what staff call an “extreme public presence” by opening a first-floor gallery. “Kids don't have enough venues where they can invite people in and show them what they've accomplished,” says Flannery. When the gallery opened in May 2008, passersby could finally look in the window, be intrigued by what they saw, and walk inside during regular hours.



But RAW had no intention of leaving its public presence to chance. With Participation Learning Network (PLN) funding, staff shaped a long-term plan to engage adult audiences and build long-term adult investment in their efforts. The plan addressed the many different constituencies that are vital to RAW's work, from parents who could gain greater understanding of RAW's role in their children's lives to teachers, principals, and guidance counselors who serve as allies in successfully guiding youth to adulthood. Further, staff wanted to welcome their immediate neighbors, involve their loyal supporters, and more fully engage new donors who had helped them meet the \$1.2 million fundraising goal for the purchase and renovation of the facility.

With the aim of providing adults with a “genuine RAW experience,” first-year programs in the new gallery space included exhibitions and openings, fundraising and donor appreciation events, open houses during Lynn's Third Thursday nights, an alumni reunion dinner,

“Kids don't have enough venues where they can invite people in and show them what they've accomplished.”

– Mary Flannery

and “The Big Thanks,” an evening of eating and making art for families. During Phase 2 of the PLN project, RAW expanded its programming to include film screenings, talks by guest artists, and dedicated events for neighbors and school personnel. RAW also launched two successful “Artist for a Day” adult workshops to guide participants through an artistic exploration modeled on some of the same techniques used with young artists. A career night enabled RAW youth to hear how adults had succeeded in carving out their career paths.

In fact, RAW was determined that all programming would strengthen, rather than distract from, its core mission to serve youth. “Kids need to feel the embrace of their entire community,” says Alex Rogers Pittman, former Communications Specialist. “It’s important to give students the chance to interact with adults so that they feel the support and respect of adults.”

To that end, says Flannery, “we were incredibly diligent in gathering names of the adults who have attended our events so that we can see how they might become a part of RAW by donating their time or their money.” Already, neighbors in nearby loft buildings have volunteered to host pre-parties before RAW’s major annual fundraising event.

“Being part of the PLN gave us the incentive to keep thinking about how we can use this space,” says Flannery, whose role in the organization has shifted to allow her to focus on outreach, exposure, and pursuing collaborations.

“People who have grown up with us said to me ‘RAW is now a destination,’” she says. “Can we still do more? Yes. Absolutely.”



RAW was determined that all programming would strengthen, rather than distract from, its core mission to serve youth.



Moving Up, Moving On

New facility expands programming options for ZUMIX

The PLN “encouraged us to think about who will be our audience and how we will reach out and engage them.”

– Madeleine Steczynski

I n March 2010, ZUMIX opened its doors at the Engine Company 40 Firehouse, a long-abandoned 1923 brick building just outside Maverick Square in East Boston. As it reclaimed a piece of neighborhood history, the organization also created new possibilities for its future. Only two blocks from its previous facility, the firehouse provides three times as much space for ZUMIX’s core programs in music instruction and music technology and for its youth-run radio station. And, for the first time, ZUMIX has a dedicated performance space, visible to the community through large glass windows.

“Our biggest challenge over the next several years is how to expand in our new space,” says Executive Director Madeleine Steczynski. “We have a lot of ideas and a desire to grow, but we want to be thoughtful and deliberate.”

The Participation Learning Network (PLN) project helped lay the groundwork for future growth by enabling ZUMIX to serve more youth while also beginning to forge an identity as a community cultural center. Even as staff were absorbed in the details of moving to a new space, the PLN experience encouraged them to keep an eye on the larger picture. “The core PLN question is ‘what is your relationship to your audience?’” says Steczynski. “It encouraged us to think about who will be our audience and how we will reach out and engage them.”

With more than 300 youth on its waiting list for music instruction, ZUMIX dedicated its Phase 1 PLN funds to boosting its teaching staff with several part-time instructors and to launching a guest artist program in which musicians not only conducted workshops but also performed in a community-oriented concert series.

Staff had also planned to train advanced music students to give instruction to beginners. But space constraints in the original facility and a shortage of adults to provide adequate supervision forced ZUMIX to postpone this approach. Steczynski notes that informal teaching between older and younger students occurs naturally and hopes to develop a solid mentoring program in the new facility.

As ZUMIX moved into the second phase of PLN funding, staff established a more immediate and integral role for students as Youth Arts Curators. “We wanted to bring kids into the conversation about what it means to have this facility,” says Program Director Kim Dawson. Central questions were how the new space relates to its community, and how ZUMIX can get more people in the door for arts experiences.

Students wishing to secure one of the four positions were required to submit an application and resumé and go through an interview. “We wanted them to experience a real world situation,” says Dawson. The curators lend a youth perspective to both programming decisions and outreach strategies. “They bring enthusiasm to everything they do and remind us why we do this work,” she says.

Staff had assumed that the youth would concentrate on electronic communication to reach their peers. “But they like to be out and about on the street, not always on the computer,” says Dawson. “They have flyer neighborhoods and reminded us of the power of grassroots outreach.”

ZUMIX hopes to secure additional youth employment funding to maintain the Youth Arts Curator positions and add new Youth Music Mentor positions. Staff are also considering what kind of new programming opportunities the space makes possible. “Through our PLN partners, we have seen what it takes to be a presenting organization,” says Steczynski. “We have a beautiful performance space and are exploring how guest artists might enhance programming while building visibility and bringing in additional earned income.” She notes that student ensembles also might be able to share the bill as opening acts.

The perspective gained from other organizations in the Participation Learning Network will be invaluable as ZUMIX moves forward. “I really appreciated being able to learn from established arts presenters and producers,” says Steczynski. “I know I can call on them even after the formal PLN has concluded.”



PHOTOS BY HOTSHOTS



Maybe It's Not Just About the Money: Exploring the Real Crisis Facing the Arts

Ben Cameron, Program Director for the Arts at the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, issued a call for change in his March 2009 presentation to Participation Learning Network members and other arts organizations and artists.

Cameron acknowledged that the financial crisis has led to an unprecedented level of uncertainty in the nonprofit sector, but nonetheless maintained that “the crisis is not financial.” Noting the ongoing erosion of audience and the impact of technology on the arts, Cameron asserted that “the crisis is of urgency and relevance.”

Many organizations are in the midst of a generational shift in leadership that often prompts a process of evaluation and reordering priorities. But to survive, all organizations must be “rigorously clear about their values and mission and willing to reassess all their operations,” Cameron said.

“The crisis
is of
urgency
and
relevance.”

– Ben Cameron

He implored arts organizations not only to examine “how we can change the world, but also how we can be open to the change that the world expects from us.”

Cameron acknowledged that change can provoke anxiety and a sense of loss. Nonetheless he looked to the future with a sense of promise. “This time could be a renaissance,” he predicted. “The time that we renegotiate all our behaviors to create a new reality.”

(View a video of Cameron's presentation on the WGBH Forum Network web site, <http://forum-network.org/>.)

The Audience Talks Back

In-depth knowledge guides programming at the Coolidge Corner Theatre

Brookline's first movie theater opened in Coolidge Corner in 1933, was saved from a threat of demolition by an upwelling of grassroots support in the late 1980s, and has been operating as an independent, nonprofit art theater ever since.

"We like to think that we knew that our patrons were invested in a neighborhood theater," says Elizabeth Taylor-Mead, Associate Director of the Coolidge Corner Theatre Foundation (CCTF). "But we didn't know what they didn't like, what we could do better." On joining the Participation Learning Network (PLN), the foundation's first priority was to conduct an audience research study to, as Taylor-Mead describes it, "fill the knowledge gaps about our audience, members, and donors."

Involvement in the PLN came at yet another critical juncture in the theater's history. The board was conducting a search for a new executive director and had hired a consultant to conduct an overall assessment of the organization. Taylor-Mead admits that participating in the learning network during a time of organizational transition was sometimes difficult, but also "very motivating. We got a real picture of what our standing is in the cultural community. It was a stamp of approval and we had to be accountable. It helped focus us."

While the theater building itself is no longer threatened—the Art Deco main screen is, in fact, a beloved local landmark—the organi-

zation must address other challenges. Of all the groups in the PLN, the Coolidge may face the strongest competition from the ever-expanding universe of home entertainment.

"We need to develop more proactive programming," says Taylor-Mead. "Program selection is critical to our revenue." So, too, is support from members and donors. With more information, "we could be smart about strategizing how to get the people in our audience more involved as members and donors."

When the Coolidge hired Brookline-based Insight Research & Training (<http://insightrt.com>) to conduct an audience research study, it was the first such formal effort in the theater's more than 75-year history. Up to that point, the only data available was the number of tickets sold.

"They had huge holes in their information base," says Wendy Dodek, Insight's founder. "But they knew what they needed to know—who their audience members are, where they live, how often they attend..."

Dodek devised a three-pronged approach to gathering useful information in the most cost-effective manner. To build a basic visitor database, simple questionnaires were handed out after selected performances. Almost 550 people



“We need to develop more proactive programming. Program selection is critical to our revenue.”

– Elizabeth Taylor-Mead

completed the survey, providing general information on age, town of residence, and frequency of visits. They also indicated whether they were CCTF members and identified their main sources of information about upcoming programs.

To continue to hone the information down and get a richer picture, almost 100 people (drawn from the survey respondents and other volunteers recruited through CCTF’s e-mail newsletter) participated in phone interviews that probed their satisfaction with all aspects of the Coolidge Theatre experience from programs to pricing to the facility itself.

Finally, 29 of the phone survey participants gathered in live focus groups. “It was the first opportunity to give direct feedback to an institution they care about,” says Dodek. “Even people who had issues with the Coolidge appreciated the chance to have someone hear their concerns.”

It was also Dodek’s opportunity to use projective techniques (“Coolidge is a person and is attending a party that you’re hosting...describe that person to me”) to get to what she calls “the emotional core” of the organization. “Is this a person you would want to hang out with? Or is this person stuffy?” she explains. “If you can find a couple of specific images, it will help an organization learn how to promote their offerings or change the look of their web site. It can help them decide what media to use in marketing themselves.”

Dodek found that the strong response to the research study “speaks volumes about how people value the Coolidge.” She also notes that such surveys can help to build loyalty to an organization. “If participants see some of their ideas implemented, they will be happy and will share with others,” she says. “But if nothing changes, it could have the opposite effect.”

Perhaps the biggest surprise from the audience research study was that “the age range of our audience is more well-distributed than we had thought,” says Taylor-Mead. Staff had assumed that students and seniors predominated, but the survey revealed a broader range, including many middle-aged local couples, who might be recruited as members and donors. While about a third of the respondents are frequent visitors (at least once a month), less than 15 percent are members. “Many weren’t aware that we offer a membership category,” says Taylor-Mead.

Those who are members confirmed staff assumptions about their motivation. “Members join to be part of a community and to support the mission of the Coolidge,” says Taylor-Mead. “They are less interested in discounts.”

Defining the mission and future direction of the Coolidge was the key question facing board members as they navigated the transition to a new executive director. Feedback from Dodek’s study helped to guide their decision-making. In recent years, the Coolidge had begun to supplement its film programming with live performances in an effort to diversify audiences and sources of income. Survey participants, however, expressed a strong preference for the Coolidge to focus on its mission “to entertain, enlighten and engage—building community through film culture.”

Respondents had limited interest in live events that lacked a film connection, but greater interest in “film-plus” events that tie a film to other activities such as a reading or music performance.

“People want more variety of edgy, well-crafted films that they can’t see anywhere else,” says Taylor-Mead. “We are trying to trust our audience and what they tell us,” she says. “They helped us think about programming.”

With new Executive Director Denise Kasell on board, the Coolidge is concentrating on extended curatorial programming, including independent and foreign films and documentaries, and is no longer pursuing live programming that was sapping resources while offering little return.

Other audience feedback cut less to the heart of the Coolidge's mission, but revealed weaknesses that jeopardized the quality of the overall film-going experience. Staff have been able to address some of the immediate concerns by initiating training for box office staff to curb complaints about rudeness, and upgrading a small theater where uncomfortable seating and poor image quality on the screen were a source of dissatisfaction.

Staff have also learned to better communicate about shortcomings that cannot be immediately resolved. Many patrons have complained about waiting in ticket lines outside the lobby, especially during bad weather. In the past, the Coolidge had not adequately explained that fire code regulations forbid crowds to gather inside. While trying to find a permanent solution, "we ordered hundreds of large umbrellas for customers to use in inclement weather," says Taylor-Mead, "and if the line is long, we offer complimentary coffee."

The need for better communication to build audience numbers as well as a greater sense of community may, in fact, be the single most important lesson that emerged from Dodek's work.

"People told us that we don't do enough marketing," says Taylor-Mead. "They told us that they didn't realize that we offer memberships." The Coolidge has taken what Taylor-Mead calls "simple and cost-effective" steps to better communicate with its patrons and reach out to a broader audience. Weekly program updates are

sent via e-mail and the theater has established a presence on Facebook and Twitter. When the technology is in place, an e-mail thank you will be sent to patrons immediately following their visit.

Sustained growth in programming, marketing, and outreach will require a significant upgrade in technology. Dodek's research revealed that about one-third of audience members use the web site for program information, but few take advantage of other features. So, making the web site more user-friendly was a priority.

To take a comprehensive look at technology needs, the board formed a Tech Task Force and created a dedicated position for a media director. Phase two PLN funding supported this long-term investment in organizational capacity, including new software for ticketing and database management. The new software allows Coolidge staff to customize its system to collect information about its audiences and potential supporters, and to develop a module that facilitates programming and facilities decisions based on the audience constituency.

Since no single program suite existed that would address the specific needs of movie theaters, the Coolidge worked with Agile software company to develop the technology for ticketing, membership, and donor management and communication.

"By developing these tools, we feel we can better serve our audiences and be the beta model for independent art house theaters across the country," says Taylor-Mead.



Root Cause: Lessons from the Economic Crisis for Arts Organizations and Their Audiences

In its 30-year history, the Nonprofit Finance Fund has witnessed “two recessions, a credit crunch and a stock market crash,” President and CEO Clara Miller told Participation Learning Network members during her November 2009 presentation.

“Now we are having all four at once,” she observed. “It’s a doozy.”

Her organization (www.nonprofitfinance-fund.org) fulfills its mission “to create a strong, well-capitalized and durable nonprofit sector that connects money to mission effectively” by providing loans, grants, and technical assistance to nonprofit organizations. However painful the current financial downturn may be, Miller was quick to acknowledge, “It’s also a learning moment. Recession makes us hasten to adapt.”

Miller has observed that successful organizations are flexible in responding to changing circumstances. “Think about business in a different way—how to reconfigure staff, assets, and relationships to audiences to be robust going forward,” she said.

Just as the logic model of program development (see page 9) emphasizes setting goals before determining actions, Miller advised organizations to “think of expenditures in terms of not what you want to buy, but what you want to

“Recession makes us hasten to adapt.”

– Clara Miller

accomplish.” In the new economic reality, organizations may also have to ask what they can eliminate without sacrificing quality.

To make the best decisions, Miller said “artistic leadership, board members, and financial managers have to work together.” And it’s equally important, she said, for organizations to make a distinction between capital investment and ongoing revenue.

“Always think in terms of net revenue,” she said. “For sustainability, it’s essential to consider how much it costs to bring in the revenue.”

When investing capital funds for growth, Miller encouraged organizations to think broadly. “Capital must be deployed to change something,” she said, “but it’s not just for bricks and mortar. Invest in program changes or an artistic advancement fund to improve quality.”

Moreover, Miller advised organizations to “articulate what the cost is to create quality programs in a dialogue with funders. A financial story goes alongside a programmatic story.” She noted, only half in jest, “Accounting is destiny.”

View a video of Miller’s presentation on the WGBH Forum Network web site, <http://forum-network.org/>.

Spotlight on a Community Landmark

Building an audience for the Strand

"The Strand is one of our biggest challenges," says Christopher Cook, explaining why the Boston Mayor's Office of Arts, Tourism & Special Events chose to focus Participation Learning Network (PLN) funding on building an audience for the 1,400-seat theater in Uphams Corner.

The ornate movie and vaudeville house opened to great fanfare in 1918. But it had largely fallen into disrepair by the time the city acquired it in the 1970s, hoping to capitalize on the potential of the landmark facility to provide cultural opportunities and stimulate economic development for the multicultural neighborhoods that surround it.

Following the most recent \$6 million investment in facility upgrades, "we decided that we also needed to make a significant programming investment," says Cook, who serves as Director of Arts, Education and Outreach for the city's arts office.

To remove financial barriers to participation, the Strand presented a series of free "Strand Spotlight" performing arts events, with an

emphasis on family programming. The goal was not only to showcase the theater as a neighborhood resource, but also to enable participating organizations to reach out to new audiences.

Attendance at the seven Strand Spotlight events presented during the first year varied widely, but exceeded the total attendance goal of 2,800 by more than 200 participants. During the second year, the free programs did not reach more ambitious audience goals of 950 persons per event. "But we did see audience growth," says Cook, and "provided a service to the community."

Staff also learned that audience members were not drawn specifically to the theater itself. "We have developed a new audience base to draw on," says Cook, "but the decision to attend the Strand is genre specific. We have to remain just as aggressive for marketing every event."

The Spotlight events also laid the groundwork for long-term growth. As a result of their participation, several organizations, including the Boston Children's Chorus, the Boston Lyric Opera, and the Discovery Ensemble, plan to continue to perform or conduct education programs at the Strand.





“Attending a performance at the Strand can be a gateway experience.”

– Christopher Cook

Audience surveys completed at Spotlight events will provide valuable information to guide future programming and outreach. While the Strand has a specific commitment to the surrounding communities of Dorchester, Roxbury, and Mattapan, surveys revealed that programs drew audience members from a much larger geographic area. “It speaks to the power of the arts,” says Cook, and to the fact that “Uphams Corner is seen as a safe destination.”

While previous marketing efforts had focused on distributing flyers to community centers and libraries, the surveys revealed that most attendees had learned about upcoming events from the free newspaper available at subway stations or from their neighborhood newspaper. “Our online advertising is almost negligible,” says Cook.

Staff were encouraged to learn that audience members indicated an interest in more cultural programming. “But the emphasis is on free programming,” says Cook, “which makes it very challenging.” Although it will prove difficult to present as full a roster of performances, free Spotlight events will remain part of the Strand program mix and staff will seek other funding sources to help subsidize the expense.

“Attending a performance at the Strand can be a gateway experience,” says Cook. “We want to continue to provide experiences where nothing is a barrier. Our hope is that we are building a paying customer base for programs here at the Strand and ultimately for other organizations throughout the city.”



Performance and Participation: The Art of Audience Engagement

The Participation Learning Network's final forum presentation took place on May 27, 2010, when ArtsBoston Executive Director Catherine Peterson moderated a discussion between American Repertory Theater Artistic Director/CEO Diane Paulus and choreographer and MacArthur Foundation "Genius" Award recipient Elizabeth Streb. As the capstone convening of Participation Learning Network, the forum touched on many of the themes at the core of projects undertaken over the four-year initiative.

"My passion is the audience. The art of audience engagement has been my theme as an artist," Paulus asserted. Her joint appointment as both artistic and business leader of the A.R.T. (see page 42) only emphasizes that successful audience engagement requires the commitment and attention of all facets of an organization. "The audience can actually motivate an artistic event and stimulate decisions," Paulus said.

"The act of an audience coming out to the theater is a very generous act, especially today in our very busy lives," she continued. "We have to meet the audience more than half way in terms of what the necessity of the event is." But that doesn't mean that artists should shy away from challenging work. Paulus rejected the notion that artists should "stay pure" by nurturing their vision without regard for potential audience members and drew lessons from her just-completed first season at the A.R.T.

"The audience can actually motivate an artistic event and stimulate decisions."

– Diane Paulus

"What if people really want to do dance and not watch it?"

– Elizabeth Streb

Among other productions, the A.R.T. presented the U.S. premiere of *Sleep No More* by the British theater company Punchdrunk. The immersive experience was inspired by Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. "We used 44 rooms of an abandoned public school in Brookline and audience members wandered through and experienced the play at their own pace."

The unconventional production in an unfamiliar setting was a risk, Paulus acknowledged. "But the show was mind-blowingly successful. It was the highest grossing box office show that the A.R.T. has ever produced in a season." In fact, more than half the audience members returned to see the production at least a second time.

"Audience engagement doesn't mean that we have to lower our standards and pander to an audience," Paulus contended. "*Sleep No More* couldn't be a more esoteric experience, but it was also the most audience maniacal."

Streb, a self-described movement anthropologist, also believes that audiences will respond to work that stretches their minds and imaginations. She founded the STREB Extreme Action Company in 1985 and opened the STREB Lab for Action Mechanics in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, in 2003. "Our project is to do something so startling that no one can believe that you just did that," she said. "We do 15 weeks of shows a year. I'm letting people decide if they want to come in by pure viral marketing, by

word of mouth. It's the most powerful marketing tool."

Streb and Paulus both recognized that audience members' first impressions should set the tone for a positive experience. "Artists sometimes think that our work is just what we put on the stage," said Paulus. "But what the tickets look like, what the atmosphere is like when you enter the theater—all these things are as important as the artistic event."

Streb pays a lot of attention to creating a physical sense of welcome at her facility. When she secured the building in Williamsburg, she told the audience, "I asked, 'What am I going to do inside here?' But even more, 'What's visible from the very front as you are walking by that will make the Con Ed guy and the woman who delivers mail go *What the heck's going on in there?*'"

Streb wants every person who passes by to feel comfortable enough to step through the door—whether to use the bathrooms or drinking fountain or to watch a rehearsal in progress. "I started to demythologize the practice," she said, while also breaking down the barrier between audience and performer.

"What if people really want to do dance and not watch it?" she asked, explaining that, during performances she began to invite audience members to take part in five minutes of audience karaoke. "The trouble was to get them off the stage," she recalled.

"We believe in audience sovereignty."

– Elizabeth Streb

"I'm not asking [the audience] to like everything. But are they engaged?"

– Diane Paulus

When the STREB company is presented in other venues, they are equally mindful to empower the audience. They undermine the traditional announcements about theater protocol by encouraging audience members to take out their cellphones and take pictures. "We believe in audience sovereignty," Streb explained.

"I think that audience sovereignty is a reality moving into the 21st century," Paulus concurred, noting that there is nothing more satisfying than going to a rock concert and demanding an encore. "A large part of leading an organization is actually speaking to the audience and helping them to understand and relate to your mission. I'm not asking them to like everything. But are they engaged?"

Both women are committed to the power of the live performance. "The main thing is to create something that is alive, where audience members feel that their presence matters and that anything can happen. There is a human need to go through an experience together in space and time."

(View a video of the presentation by Paulus and Streb on the WGBH Forum Network web site, <http://forum-network.org/>.)

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Available at <http://forum-network.org/>

Paulus, Diane, and Streb, Elizabeth. “Performance and Participation: The Art of Audience Engagement.”

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Participants

American Repertory Theater www.americanrepertorytheater.org

Arsenal Center for the Arts www.arsenalarts.org

ArtsBoston www.artsboston.org

Boston Children's Chorus www.bostonchildrenschorus.org

Boston Children's Museum www.bostonkids.org

Boston Lyric Opera www.blo.org

Boston Symphony Orchestra www.bso.org

Coolidge Corner Theatre Foundation www.coolidge.org

From the Top www.fromthetop.org

Harvard Art Museums www.harvardartmuseums.org

Huntington Theatre Company www.huntingtontheatre.org

Institute of Contemporary Art www.icaboston.org

Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum www.gardnermuseum.org

José Mateo Ballet Theatre www.ballettheatre.org

Mayor's Office of Arts, Tourism and Special Events www.cityofboston.gov/ARTS

Museum of Fine Arts www.mfa.org

New Repertory Theatre www.newrep.org

Opera Boston www.operaboston.org

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The Theater Offensive www.thetheateroffensive.org

World Music/CRASHarts www.worldmusic.org

ZUMIX www.zumix.org

The Boston Foundation www.tbf.org

Massachusetts Cultural Council www.massculturalcouncil.org

The Wallace Foundation www.wallacefoundation.org

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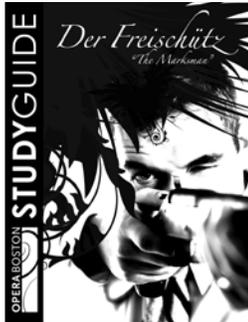
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