

B/A/S | STORIES

BUILDING AUDIENCES FOR SUSTAINABILITY

The Wallace Foundation®



Theatre
Communications
Group



DENVER CENTER THEATRE COMPANY IS CRACKING THE MILLENNIAL CODE... ONE STEP AT A TIME

A DISCUSSION GUIDE

This guide explores preliminary insights from Denver Center Theatre Company's audience-building efforts as part of The Wallace Foundation's Building Audiences for Sustainability Initiative

ABOUT THIS DISCUSSION GUIDE

As part of The Wallace Foundation’s Building Audiences for Sustainability (BAS) initiative, Denver Center Theatre Company, a division of the Denver Center for the Performing Arts (DCPA), sought to attract millennial audiences through experiential or “immersive” theater. In February 2018, the foundation released a written and video story, *Denver Center Theatre Company Is Cracking the Millennial Code...One Step at a Time*, as part of a continuing series that records early-stage efforts of performing arts organizations to expand their audiences.

The story demonstrates how Denver Center Theatre Company has used market research to learn about and more effectively target younger attendees, who better reflect the demographic breakdown of the Denver region. The average age of a single ticket buyer for the DCPA is 50; for a subscriber it is 63, while millennials, defined as people born between 1981 and 1997, account for 24 percent of the population in Denver. Denver Center hypothesized that experiential theater—productions that allow performers and audiences to interact with one another in an immersive environment—would appeal to younger audiences. Armed with this hypothesis, the organization began to experiment with small, interactive performances in non-traditional spaces.

The purpose of this Discussion Guide is to help arts administrators, board members and arts practitioners working within varying disciplines and with a range of budget sizes to better understand and apply lessons from another institution’s experience to their own context. The guide can serve as a teaching aid for small-group discussions, as well as individual study. It is designed to be used in conjunction with the written and/or video versions of the story.

The BAS initiative is more than half-completed, with more years of learning to come. The BAS Stories project is designed to offer preliminary insights, as arts organizations apply what they’re learning to their work. In late 2018, the first implementation study by a team of independent researchers will also be published.

This Discussion Guide was created by Theatre Communications Group, the national organization for the American theater, founded to strengthen, nurture, and promote the not-for-profit professional theater.

DOWNLOAD THE STORY AND VIDEO

Prior to completing this Discussion Guide, read the written story and watch the video that describe Denver Center Theatre Company’s use of market research to more effectively target millennial audiences. The story and video are available on the following web page:

The Ballet Austin article and video are available on the following webpage:

<http://www.wallacefoundation.org/DenverCenter>

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION

A THE AUDIENCE GOAL

- a.1. Denver Center Theatre Company identified its aging audience base as an urgent concern. What seems urgent to your organization?
- a.2. How did the changing demographics of the Denver community influence the theater's choice of target audience? What demographic shifts are taking place in your community?
- a.3. What role did Denver Center's staff demographics play in analyzing its audience goals? How could you see your staff doing something similar?
- a.4. In what ways are Denver Center's audience changes similar or different to shifts in participation with your organization?

B INITIAL ASSUMPTIONS

- b.1. The theater's programming was initially guided by the aesthetic interests of younger staff members and a small advisory council. What were some of their initial assumptions on the preferences of millennial audiences?
- b.2. What assumptions do you have about your target audiences?
- b.3. How do the intersections of various demographic identities—such as age, class, disability, gender, race, and sexual orientation—influence your assumptions?

C MARKET RESEARCH

- c.1. What specifically did Denver Center hope to discover through market research?
- c.2. How did Denver Center's approach to research evolve with each immersive performance?
- c.3. What research tools could your organization use to better understand the interplay between aesthetic risk and audience experience?

D THE FINDINGS

- d.1. What did Denver Center learn about their initial target demographic of millennials?
- d.2. What did Denver Center learn about the overall appeal of different kinds of immersive programming?
- d.3. How did that challenge their ideas about programming?
- d.4. How is Denver Center using research to reveal not just the popularity of a particular show, but the viability of immersive programming as an overall brand?

E DESIGNING NEW STRATEGIES

- e.1. What differentiated each of the immersive events Denver Center developed?
- e.2. Why did Denver Center decide to make changes to their programming, even though *Sweet & Lucky* was extremely popular with audiences and drove high ticket sales?
- e.3. How did Denver Center carry the learnings from each immersive event into the next? What specifically did they change about each subsequent production and why?
- e.4. What alternative spaces does your organization currently have that might be used for this kind of continuous experimentation?
- e.5. What biases does your organization have about letting market research inform aesthetic experimentation? What is the right balance for your organization?
- e.6. How do you see this aesthetic experimentation aligning with your overall strategic plan?

F IMPLEMENTATION

- f.1. How did Denver Center build collaboration between its artistic and marketing departments?
- f.2. How would you describe the business model that Denver Center is evolving for its immersive theater work?
- f.3. How have partnerships been a key driver of Denver Center's success?
- f.4. What barriers do you see to implementing similar partnerships, cross-departmental collaborations and alternative business models—and how might you address them?

G ASSESSMENT

- g.1. What were the advantages to letting artistic experimentation lead the early parts of the process? What critical lessons were learned from that early prototyping of immersive experiences with smaller audiences?
- g.2. What opportunities does your organization have to conduct similar small-scale prototypes? Do you have staff that you believe may share aesthetic interests with your target demographics?
- g.3. How might you build a continuous learning loop in your process of experimentation?
- g.4. How could research empower more responsive marketing decisions for your theater, as happened with Denver Center's *Travelers of the Lost Dimension*?
- g.5. How might Denver Center reach financial stability for immersive theater, and what research tools might help achieve that goal?
- g.6. How is Denver Center expanding the intersectionality (i.e., not just diversity of age) of the communities they hope to reach, and what changes might that require from their assessment tools?

ABOUT DENVER CENTER PERFORMING ARTS CENTER

The Denver Center for the Performing Arts (DCPA) is the largest nonprofit theater organization in the nation, presenting Broadway tours and producing theater, cabaret, musicals, and innovative, immersive plays.

Last season the DCPA engaged with more than 1.2 million visitors, generating a \$150 million economic impact in ticket sales alone. Additionally, DCPA Education serves more than 105,000 students of all ages and skill levels through classes, in-school programs, matinees, and audience engagement opportunities.

As the newest and most unconventional line of programming of the Denver Center for the Performing Arts, Off-Center specializes in unexpected experiences such as *Sweet & Lucky*, the first large-scale immersive show in Denver, and *The Wild Party*, a decadent 360° party set in the Roaring '20s. An Off-Center show is like no other theater experience—by design. Off-Center focuses more on connecting people and upending expectations than on adhering to tradition. If you leave the show thinking “I’ve never seen anything like it,” then Off-Center has done its job. We want you to lose yourself, to welcome surprise and to remember that life is better when you live it Off-Center.

ABOUT THEATRE COMMUNICATIONS GROUP

For over 55 years, Theatre Communications Group (TCG), the national organization for U.S. theater, has existed to strengthen, nurture, and promote the professional not-for-profit theater. TCG’s constituency has grown from a handful of groundbreaking theaters to over 700 member theaters and affiliate organizations, and more than 12,000 individuals nationwide. TCG offers its

members networking and knowledge-building opportunities through conferences, events, research, and communications; awards grants, approximately \$2 million per year, to theater companies and individual artists; advocates on the federal level; and through the Global Theater Initiative, TCG’s partnership with the Laboratory for Global Performance and Politics, serves as the U.S. Center of the International Theatre Institute. TCG is North America’s largest independent publisher of dramatic literature, with 15 Pulitzer Prizes for Best Play on the TCG booklist. It also publishes the award-winning *American Theatre* magazine and ARTSEARCH®, the essential source for a career in the arts. In all of its endeavors, TCG seeks to increase the organizational efficiency of its Member Theatres, cultivate and celebrate the artistic talent and achievements of the field, and promote a larger public understanding of, and appreciation for, the theater. www.tcg.org

ABOUT BUILDING AUDIENCES FOR SUSTAINABILITY

The Denver Center Theatre Company, a division of the Denver Center for the Performing Arts (DCPA), is one of 25 performing arts organizations participating in The Wallace Foundation’s Building Audiences for Sustainability (BAS) effort, a six-year, \$52-million initiative aimed at developing practical insights into how arts organizations can successfully expand their audiences. Building Audiences for Sustainability (BAS) continues the foundation’s 25-year history of support for the arts, with a particular emphasis on building audiences.

Representing a spectrum of organizations—from dance and opera companies to orchestras, theaters, and multidisciplinary arts institutions—the selected partners receive financial and technical support from the foundation to research and develop their

audience-building work. The evidence gathered from these organizations will be documented and analyzed by an independent team of researchers at the University of Texas, Austin, providing valuable insights, ideas, and information for the entire field.

The projects carried out by the arts organizations are designed to reach a variety of diverse audiences, including racial and ethnic groups, age cohorts (primarily young people), and people working in specific sectors. Strategies include commissioning new art that resonates with particular groups, involving target audience members in the creation and selection of works to be performed, creating events that allow audience members to gather and learn more about the art, and staging works in non-traditional venues that are more easily accessible to the target audience.

The effort is structured around continuous learning. Each organization's audience-building project is informed by research, implementation, assessment, and revision.

The current initiative draws from lessons learned in earlier foundation efforts, including the Wallace Excellence Awards. In that 2006–14 venture, 54 arts organizations in six cities sought to use reliable data and analysis to design and carry out

projects to increase the size of their audiences, diversify them, or encourage current audience members to attend more often. The results were promising among the 46 arts groups for which Wallace obtained reliable data: across the 11 organizations that sought to increase the overall size of their audience, the median gain over about three years was 27 percent.

ABOUT THE WALLACE FOUNDATION

Based in New York City, The Wallace Foundation is an independent national philanthropy dedicated to fostering improvements in learning and enrichment for disadvantaged children and the vitality of the arts for everyone. It seeks to catalyze broad impact by supporting the development, testing, and sharing of new solutions and effective practices. At www.wallacefoundation.org, the foundation maintains an online library about what it has learned, including knowledge from its current efforts aimed at: strengthening education leadership to improve student achievement, helping selected cities make good afterschool programs available to more children, expanding arts learning opportunities for children and teens, providing high-quality summer learning programs to disadvantaged children, enriching and expanding the school day in ways that benefit students, and helping arts organizations build their audiences.

If you are interested in learning more about using market research to better understand your audiences, ***Taking Out the Guesswork: Using Research to Build Arts Audiences*** is a practical guide to conducting market research with low-cost solutions applicable to organizations of all sizes and disciplines. Download the free guide along with other Wallace resources here.



This marks the third resource in the Discussion Guide Series, the first of which explores insights into Ballet Austin's efforts to expand audiences for unfamiliar works, and the second on Seattle Symphony's work to target new audiences in downtown Seattle. The full series can be accessed at: www.wallacefoundation.org/DenverCenter