



THE WALLACE FOUNDATION ARTS GRANTEE CONFERENCE
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arts for all

CONNECTING TO NEW AUDIENCES


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This and other resources on arts participation, education leadership and out-of-school time learning can be downloaded for free at www.wallacefoundation.org.

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INTRODUCTION

Over the last two decades, The Wallace Foundation has worked to make the arts a part of the lives of more people, a commitment first given expression by our co-founder Lila Acheson Wallace, who said, “the arts belong to everyone.”

In its current arts participation work, Wallace is carrying out two strategies aimed at increasing and deepening participation in the arts. Arts for Young People seeks to build future audiences by helping selected cities develop coordinated approaches to expanding high-quality arts learning for children both inside and outside school. The Wallace Excellence Awards (WEA) support exemplary arts organizations in selected cities to identify, develop and share effective practices to reach more people.

It is this second audience-building initiative that was the subject of a Wallace-sponsored conference April 2-4, 2008 in San Francisco, and is the focus of this report.

Called “Arts for All: Connecting to New Audiences,” the gathering brought together WEA recipients and other arts leaders to discuss how arts organizations can reach current and potential participants and find effective ways to engage them, at a time when there are more and more competing alternatives for people’s leisure hours. Some 191 arts leaders took part in the event, including representatives of all but three of the 57 organizations that have received Wallace Excellence Awards since the program began in 2004. The majority of those organizations are located in the four cities that are currently WEA sites: Boston, Chicago, Philadelphia and San Francisco.

This post-conference report opens with excerpts of remarks delivered by Wallace Foundation President M. Christine DeVita. She discussed how foundations can fill an essential need by developing credible knowledge about effective ways to increase participation in the arts. This idea, she told the gathering, is the basis for the Wallace Excellence Awards, which provide “risk capital” to arts organizations to test and share new participation-building strategies. “Foundations, working closely with partners, can forge innovations, gather evidence and share lessons. Then, the ideas that emerge can be acted on voluntarily by other organizations, each in its own way, for the betterment of society,” she said.

The report continues with a detailed account of the proceedings by András Szántó, whose writing and research spans many fields including the arts and who is a member of the senior faculty of the Sotheby’s Institute of Art in New York and director of the National Endowment for the Arts’ NEA Arts Journalism Institute at Columbia University’s Graduate School of Journalism. Two San Francisco-based arts writers also contributed to this conference report: Jerry Karp, who writes frequently on music and other subjects, and Lily Tung, who is also a news producer and serves on the board of the National Arts Journalism Program. As you will read in the piece, the conference explored three specific ways that arts groups can widen their audiences: improving their marketing, using technology and undertaking audience research.

Participants were advised, first of all, to cast off notions of marketing as a threat to artistic integrity and view it instead as a promising way to bring what they have to offer to people who

tend not to be frequent arts attendees: 20-somethings, diverse ethnic and cultural groups, and families with young children. In his keynote address, Chip Conley, the owner of a successful chain of boutique hotels, discussed how the ideas he was using to appreciate the needs of his clientele and provide experiences that appealed to those needs might also be relevant to arts organizations trying to better attract and keep audiences.

The Internet and other new media open other possibilities for engaging current and potential audience members, from social networking sites to iTunes to text-messaging. Participants were advised not only to familiarize themselves with new technologies, but also to understand how they were changing people's expectations about entertainment — that online video game players, for example, want as much out of the social experience of interacting with players online as out of the game itself.

And research, conference participants learned, means more than tallying up the number of people who attend a performance. It can reveal different segments of audience members, thereby offering arts organizations a clear picture of the varying motivations that drive different groups to, or away from, the arts. Armed with such knowledge, arts groups can equip themselves to develop more finely-tuned programming and marketing.

Throughout the conference, speakers emphasized that arts organizations perform a service for themselves — and a field eager to learn new lessons about audience participation — when they test novel, innovative approaches to broadening, deepening and diversifying audiences. Connie Wolf, director and chief executive officer of the Contemporary Jewish Museum, a WEA recipient, neatly summarized the core challenge for arts providers at the two-day conference: “Risk is not a negative. We’re more at risk if we don’t reach out to new audiences in new ways.” ■

To read more about the ideas and lessons emerging from Wallace’s arts participation work and to download related publications for free, visit the Knowledge Center at our website at www.wallacefoundation.org.

ARTS FOR ALL: CONNECTING TO NEW AUDIENCES¹

By M. Christine DeVita
President, The Wallace Foundation

The idea animating The Wallace Foundation’s work in the arts is simple: Unless we get better at building demand and appreciation for the arts, we will not have the strong, healthy cultural life that our communities deserve and that arts organizations need in order to flourish.

We all recognize the myriad benefits the arts can bring for the individual, for the economy, and for the civic life of our communities. As educator Maxine Greene observes: “The arts create a public space in which meanings are shared and perspectives expressed and clarified.” But it is clear that this “public space” — and all of those private and public benefits created in it — start with the individual encounter with a work of art. Unless those individual encounters are widely dispersed and supported, society stands to lose the benefits that the arts provide. Moreover, our arts institutions stand to lose the force that ultimately sustains them: citizens with the ability to draw meaning from the works of art that are exhibited or performed.

Today, we see troubling signs that the benefits the arts provide are becoming less, not more, widely disseminated.

- The growth of arts organizations in the last several decades has not been matched by a corresponding growth in demand for what they have to offer.
- An increasing number of activities compete for inclusion in our leisure time.
- And analysts are seeing a decline in the rates of participation in all seven “benchmark” art forms tracked by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA): jazz, classical music, opera, musical theater, ballet, theater and visual art.²

Equally worrisome, as Princeton scholar Paul DiMaggio has documented, is that for all performing arts forms except jazz and opera, the declines are concentrated among audiences 18- to 46 years old,³ meaning that young people represent a smaller slice of the audience for the arts. At the same time, the median age of the performing arts audience is rising faster than the median age of the population.⁴ Furthermore, all of these trends are occurring against a backdrop of demographic change that is seeing the fastest growth among groups that have traditionally been less inclined toward participation in the “benchmark” arts that the NEA survey tracks.

¹ This paper is adapted from remarks by M. Christine DeVita delivered at the Wallace national grant recipient conference, “Arts for All: Connecting to New Audiences,” in San Francisco, April 2, 2008.

² Laura Zakaras, Julia F. Lowell, *Cultivating Demand for the Arts: Arts Learning, Arts Engagement and State Arts Policy*, RAND Corporation, 2008, p. 3.

³ Paul DiMaggio, Toqir Mukhtar, “Arts Participation as Cultural Capital in the United States, 1982-2002: Signs of Decline?,” in *Engaging Art: The Next Great Transformation of America’s Cultural Life*, ed. Steven J. Tepper, Bill Ivey, Routledge, 2008, p. 297.

⁴ For example, the median age of classical music attendees was 40 in 1982, and 49 in 2002; for museums, 36 and 45. Richard A. Peterson, Gabriel Rossman, “Changing Arts Audiences: Capitalizing on Omnivorosness,” *Engaging Art: The Next Great Transformation of America’s Cultural Life*, ed. Steven J. Tepper, Bill Ivey, Routledge, 2008, p. 308.

No one is suggesting the bottom is falling out of the arts, or that we are facing disaster. But as a forthcoming RAND study on *Cultivating Demand for the Arts* concludes, if we do nothing, we risk a loss of the public and private benefits the arts provide, an increasing inequity in their distribution, and a less nourishing environment for the arts organizations that sustain our cultural patrimony.

The implication is clear: there is a compelling need to build appreciation and demand for the arts. Public and private funding priorities are often focused on support for performances, buildings or exhibitions. We must now add to this list a new item: finding effective ways to introduce more Americans to rewarding arts experiences.

How do we accomplish this goal? And how can a foundation, in concert with a group of arts organizations and researchers, help in this endeavor?

While exact figures are elusive, we estimate that contributions from

foundations constitute only about 10 percent of the budgets of arts organizations. So it's clear that foundations like Wallace have limited ability to "buy" the change they would like to see.

It is also clear that foundations can't compel change to happen. No one elected us. We are not government, and we lack the democratic authority and political legitimacy for political action.

Nevertheless, we believe foundations and their partners — that is, grantees and researchers — have a major opportunity. Our pluralist society creates an open and competitive market for new, useful ideas of proven value. Foundations, working closely with partners, can forge innovations, gather evidence and share lessons. Then, the ideas that emerge can be acted on voluntarily by other organizations, each in its own way, for the betterment of society.

In other words, foundations can play a role in developing knowledge for which there is a social need — in this case, the need of arts and cultural organizations for lessons and evidence about effective ways to reach more people. To quote scholars Helmut Anheier and Diana Leat, foundations (and by implication their partners) are "potential powerhouses of creative thinking and working" that can help bring new solutions to long-standing, intransigent problems.⁵

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⁵ Helmut K. Anheier, Diana Leat, *Creative Philanthropy*, Routledge, 2006, opening summary text.

It is in the service of this idea that we established the Wallace Excellence Awards initiative, which gives our partner arts institutions the “risk capital” to test innovative approaches to reaching more people. Realizing that new practices spread when others have evidence of their effectiveness, not just anecdotes, we have asked our grantees to define the goals of their projects carefully enough that they lend themselves to measurement. In addition, we have enlisted technical advisers to help our partners as they study and assess their work.

We are taking these pains in the hope that the approaches our grantees develop will yield credible lessons that can help the broader arts sector.

We are already seeing some progress in this effort. Common themes are emerging in our partners’ work. Among them are a particular interest

in developing efforts to attract two important groups to the arts: 18- to 34-year-olds, who are a declining share of the overall audience, and families with children under 12, who represent the audiences of the future.

I began by noting some distressing trends in arts participation that should give us all pause. But there is also much to suggest that the time is right for a renewed focus on building appreciation and demand.

- The graying of the audience is increasing our national appetite for effective ways to reach more people.
- New research by scholar Richard Peterson indicates that today’s audiences are far more eclectic in their artistic choices than in the past, suggesting there may be important opportunities for cross-promotion among different art forms.
- The emergence of coordinated approaches to revitalizing arts education in cities, documented in a new Wallace-commissioned study by RAND, *Revitalizing Arts Education Through Community-Wide Coordination*, could help restore arts instruction for children both during and outside of school, thereby creating new generations that appreciate the arts.

Most fundamentally, we are heartened by the increasing recognition that the need for the arts in our lives runs deep.

In all of our work, we are driven by something that Lila Acheson Wallace, our co-founder, used to say: “The arts belong to everyone.” That was a statement of belief: that the pleasure of the arts should not be reserved for a privileged few, but are everyone’s birthright.

Now, scientific discussions suggest that Lila’s belief may have a neurological and historical basis.

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We've known for years that early man painted beautiful scenes on cave walls, with the earliest example dating back some 32,000 years. But two years ago, a British scholar, Steven Mithen, in a book called *The Singing Neanderthals: The Origins of Music, Language, Mind and Body*, argued that our ancestors 130,000 years ago communicated through a combination of music and movement, and used music to build social cohesion.

This idea suggests that our propensity for music may have preceded our development of language. It's a notion consonant with neurologists' observations that patients who lose the ability to speak sometimes gain a wider capacity for music, hinting at the possibility that the brain center's for music perception developed before the center for language.

If Lila Wallace were alive today, she might argue that "the arts belong to everyone" precisely because they are hard-wired in everyone's brain. That does not mean that bringing the arts to more people is easy. But I am certain that through the talent and ingenuity of our partner arts institutions, we can tap that innate human need inside all of us and find ways to introduce more Americans to the arts. ■

MARKETING, TECHNOLOGY AND RESEARCH: KEYS TO A NEW FUTURE IN BUILDING ARTS PARTICIPATION

A Conference Report
By András Szántó¹

“The 20th century has been cursed with an art that cannot be understood. The decadent artists stand for themselves and their chosen few, laughing at and dismissing the normal outsider.”

This sobering assessment from the British artist duo Gilbert & George greeted visitors at the entrance of their recent retrospective at the de Young Museum in San Francisco. Yet the scene unfolding outside the exhibition on a sun-filled April day suggested a less antagonistic relationship between art and public. The museum’s lobby was teeming with people arriving for a concert, a popular weekly event that successfully draws youthful crowds with late opening hours and complimentary admission. In the courtyard by the entrance, visitors came across a fashion model posing for a photographer — part of a student design contest attended by dozens of families. The architecture of the museum building, with its user-friendly installations, thrilling observation tower, and seductive restaurants and shops, is a beckoning magnet for the citizens of San Francisco. Far from being dismissed by this arts institution, the “normal outsider” is eagerly welcomed.

The challenge of building a more harmonious and regular relationship between art institutions and their audiences was the topic of a three-day gathering of 191 cultural leaders sponsored by The Wallace Foundation April 2-4, 2008. Held in San Francisco at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, the conference provided an opportunity for arts presenters to consider three major areas of concern and potential action:

- How might arts organizations harness innovative marketing methodologies to build audiences?
- How might technology catalyze these efforts, especially when it comes to cultivating a younger audience?
- And how could research make organizations smarter about designing their programming and outreach to encourage broader participation?

As the sequence of conference sessions made clear, arts presenters would benefit from new initiatives in each of these areas if they are to remain vibrant and if people are to benefit broadly from the arts.

CHANGING THE VOCABULARY

The challenge of attracting audiences is hardly new. For more than two decades, The Wallace Foundation has been providing arts and cultural institutions of every type with support to promote effective approaches to participation-building. Since 2004, the foundation has provided arts institutions in selected cities, including San Francisco, with Wallace Excellence

¹ Lily Tung and Jerry Karp contributed original reporting to this essay.

Awards to enable them to pursue innovative participation-building activities and develop information that documents the results and the lessons of those practices. The April gathering included representatives of many such Wallace Excellence Awards institutions.

But there was a palpable sense of change at this gathering, and along with it, a widespread concern about flagging or flat audience participation rates. Arts groups everywhere are learning to live amid unfamiliar realities, from shifting demographics and consumption patterns to the mounting influence of the Internet. “We must adopt a new language, especially if we want to engage with young people and particularly if we want to do so online,” said Daniel Windham, the foundation’s director of arts, at the launch of the conference.

Along with the rest of society, arts groups are questioning some of their most fundamental assumptions about how cultural participation works – what motivates people to engage in certain leisure activities, what forms of creative expression capture the public’s attention, how people learn about cultural events and how they fit art into more crowded lives. As the conference sessions made clear, appealing to traditional audiences and relying on familiar methods of audience outreach are no longer enough. Arts organizations have to become more inclusive and more creative about how they connect to the public.

Arts groups everywhere are learning to live amid unfamiliar realities, from shifting demographics and consumption patterns to the mounting influence of the Internet.

An important theme of the conference emerged early on in a spirited keynote address by Chip Conley, chief executive officer of Joie de Vivre

Hospitality, a San Francisco-based boutique hotel chain. Drawing on his knowledge of what it takes to attract customers to his hotels, he advised arts groups to think harder about how audience members see themselves. Demographics, he said, were less important than the “psychographics” of the audience — an understanding of the emotional landscape of audience members and the kind of lifestyles they lead and identify with.

Conley’s business strategy is informed in part by the theories of psychologist Abraham Maslow who, in seeking to explain human motivations, proposed a “hierarchy of needs” that people ascend in their pursuit of well-being. At the lowest rung of that hierarchy are basic needs, like food and shelter. The next steps up are comfort, belonging and self-esteem. At the top is self-actualization — the point where an individual feels like the person he or she aspires to be.

Any hotel could offer customers a clean bed or a quiet room. But as Conley put it, the question was how the experience could engage higher-order needs by reinforcing visitors’ personal

aspirations. He set about creating environments where visitors could connect to a certain set of values — what Conley calls “identity refreshment.” As he told the arts organization leaders: “One hotel is for people who read *The New Yorker*, one is for people who read *Rolling Stone*, and one is for those who read *Forbes*.” For Conley, such places can create “transformative experiences,” and these experiences are so compelling that they turn visitors into “evangelists” for his hotels who then spread free word-of-mouth publicity — an idea that clearly resonated with the arts presenters.

How does this apply to the arts? On the one hand, Conley urged arts presenters to look beyond merely providing amusement to their audience and focus instead on creating meaning — in other words, meeting higher-order emotional needs that help audience members see the world differently, develop an expanded capacity for empathy or gain a deeper self awareness. On the other hand, he advised arts groups to consider what their audience members are truly seeking when they are engaging in arts experiences. For example, many people may turn up for a symphonic concert, Conley explained, but what they are really looking for is an opportunity to feel part of a community — to have an experience that says something about who they are and who they wish to be.

Several speakers at the conference reinforced this imperative to look beyond the day-to-day work of cultural organizations and concentrate on the broader meanings that attract audiences to the arts. This requires a shift in perspective from specific productions to the all-encompassing message of an organization — the values reflected in the totality of its programming and the overall quality of the visitor experience. As Magda Martinez of the Samuel S. Fleisher Art Memorial in Philadelphia, put it: “We have to start asking ourselves, ‘What is the experience we create?’ not ‘What is the activity we offer?’”

As session after session made clear, then, arts organizations across the spectrum have to seek new ways to communicate their value to the public, or risk alienating audiences. The major pieces of this puzzle, conference attendees learned, include developing new marketing strategies and moving them closer to the heart of the arts enterprise, taking advantage of new forms of information-sharing and cultural engagement via the Internet, and making use of new knowledge gained through research. The organizations that are willing to embrace these changes — including the often-painful internal adjustments that go with them — will most likely earn the confidence of tomorrow’s audiences.

MARKETING IS NOT A DIRTY WORD

As many in the audience knew from their own experience, arts leaders often view the idea of marketing with apprehension, or worse. Imbuing outreach efforts with creativity and emotions is one thing. Elevating marketing’s role within arts organizations is quite another. The fear — not entirely unfounded — is that marketing imperatives can

overwhelm the artistic mission. Yet in the most basic sense marketing is simply about paying closer attention to the audience.

About half way through his conference presentation, Rich Silverstein, co-chairman of Goodby, Silverstein & Partners, a San Francisco advertising agency known for its inventive work, issued a pointed challenge to the arts leaders in the room: “Why can’t your marketing live up to the quality of your organization?” he demanded. “Marketing has to be as important as curating a show or putting on a performance. It has to be thoughtful and compelling.”

“Marketing has to be as important as curating a show or putting on a performance...”

Silverstein called on the conference participants to take seriously the task of advancing the brands of their

organizations. “The brand makes you part of popular culture and relevant to the public,” he said. “Branding is not about a logo. It stands for something.” Unfortunately, Silverstein observed, all too often marketing by cultural organizations boils down to “ads on the side of a bus.” In his view, arts marketing should be about what the arts do best, that is, it should capitalize on creativity. “Bring art outside,” he urged. “Have fun. Whatever you do, you need to be emotional.”

MARKETING TO REACH DIVERSE AUDIENCES

Of three sessions devoted in the conference to audience segments that arts organizations are prone to misunderstand, the first explored outreach to people of diverse ethnic or cultural backgrounds. Earning the interest of more diverse audiences demands good listening skills and avoiding pat assumptions about what they are or not willing to spend money on, according to Maurine Knighton, senior vice president for programs and nonprofits for the Upper Manhattan Empowerment Zone in New York City, an organization focused on the commercial and cultural revitalization of Harlem and surrounding communities. “It’s not always the case that people of color cannot afford to see a show,” she said. “Maybe they just didn’t know the value of it, or that value wasn’t translated to them.”

Knighton advised against assuming “a universal set of values” when marketing to minority audiences. Too often, diverse demographic groups such as “Latinos” or “Asians” are lumped together in a single category and targeted by the same means. “You’re squandering opportunities to broaden participation if you approach things in a facile or disrespectful manner,” Knighton warned.

Another mistake by arts organizations is to assume that diversity in hiring will automatically build responsive programming. Staffing for diversity means little without giving those staffers

the power to make important decisions. “A lot of people think they can hire one middle-level person to go out and engage,” Knighton said. But “oftentimes that person is not authorized to make change.”

The Chicago Sinfonietta, a Wallace Excellence Awards grant recipient that is devoted to the performance of the classical, Romantic and contemporary music repertoire, has learned many lessons over the years about successful marketing to ethnically diverse groups: at a typical concert today, some 40 percent of audience members are people of color. The orchestra, too, is diverse, with by far the largest proportion of African-American musicians among the 120 major orchestras in the United States, and people of color compose the majority of the Sinfonietta’s board members. Sustaining diversity is a goal enshrined in the group’s mission statement. “We have diversity in our audience, our board, and our orchestra,” said Founding Music Director Paul Freeman. “By having this kind of involvement on all levels, you have no choice but to have diverse programming.”

Importantly, the Sinfonietta’s board has made a long-term commitment to overcoming barriers to participation. Executive Director Jim Hirsch believes a realistic time frame for any institution making such a commitment is at least 20 years. At the heart of this effort is what he calls “cross-cultural competency.” To break down barriers, he encourages arts groups to stress personal relationships that establish direct ties into their neighborhoods. He points to the Old Town School of Folk Music, for example, which offers paid, six-month stints to “ambassadors” who serve as liaisons between the communities they come from and Old Town, a venerable Chicago institution and the largest community arts school in the United States. Initiatives like these may not necessarily arise from a marketing plan. Yet, viewed at a distance, they amount to a sensitive response to the challenge of listening to a community and building bridges to audiences.

The good news, according to Hirsch, is that funders are ready to support such efforts.

MARKETING TO REACH 20-SOMETHINGS

When it comes to younger audiences, several conference speakers expressed guarded optimism. Young people, it turns out, are flocking to the arts — only they are doing so on their own terms. “We are at the brink of a renaissance of creativity and arts that is driving change in our lives and our culture right now,” said author and marketing expert Patricia Martin, who has come up with a road map for reaching the new arts consumers. These “RenGens,” as she calls them — short for Renaissance Generation—bring different values to arts engagement from their parents. Echoing Chip Conley, Martin underscored the importance of creating meaningful experiences for this age group. How can arts organizations appeal to the values of the 20-something demographic? By being seen as problem solvers, by encouraging young people to collaborate in joint action, and by inspiring interesting fusions of artistic

practices. “Go where the RenGens are,” Martin implored. “You must look the RenGens in the eye and express your power to make an impact on the world.”

Traditional fine-arts institutions need not feel left behind in the pursuit of young audiences. Julie Crites, director of program planning for Boston’s Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, has counterbalanced the museum’s collection — which at the founder’s behest has been largely unchanged since her death in 1924 — with dynamic public programming, geared to a wider and especially younger audience. The museum’s monthly Gardner After Hours program opens up the Gardner’s atmospheric courtyard for refreshments and conversation, while the entire museum remains open with programs throughout the galleries. Programs such as short Viewfinder talks, jazz concerts, and sketching activities — which offer a mixture of art, informal, self-directed learning and socializing activities — appeal particularly to younger people.

The museum’s publicity for these events makes ample use of digital media, including text messaging and social networking sites like Facebook. These new marketing and programming approaches are surprising at an esteemed, seemingly sedate Boston institution activities — and no one could be happier than Crites. “This young audience has really been underestimated and under-programmed,” Crites said recently. “I feel that a lot of museums — in earlier models of evening hours — have just kept their galleries open and offered a bar and then wondered why no one explores the galleries. You have to give people a reason to explore, especially if they are less familiar with visiting museums, independently. We are finding that this demographic will certainly participate, especially if the programming is fun, informal, frequent and can be joined at various points in an evening.”

None of the conference speakers went so far as to say that wooing young people is easy. With their often-short attention spans and fluid, eclectic tastes, young audiences test the ingenuity of presenters in fine and commercial arts alike. The trick, according to Judith Hurtig, artistic director of Hancher Auditorium at the University of Iowa, lies in finding a way to connect new cultural experiences to familiar ones. Hancher is always on the lookout for programs that have appeal to people born after 1980, and has learned many lessons about what works for young audiences and what doesn’t. It has had some success, for example, in presenting cutting-edge circus acts to the college-age students. But “no matter what circus troupe we bring in,” Hurtig said with a note of frustration, “everyone refers to them as Cirque du Soleil. They only respond to well-known brands.”

MARKETING TO REACH CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

Connecting with the youngest audiences — children under 12 — presents a different challenge. To reach them, arts groups have to convince their parents to devote family time and resources to cultural pursuits. “We have to think about marketing to families, but also market-

ing through families,” said Philippe Ravanas, a professor in the arts, entertainment and media management department at Columbia College Chicago. Ravanas honed his skills in family marketing at Eurodisney. Some of the insights he gained there turn out to have applicability for cultural organizations, which, in common with Disney, can adopt a more strategically layered approach to reaching out to families with kids.

When it comes to convincing families to take part in arts activities, said Ravanas, organizations have to “take into account a web of influences and a web of actors in the final decision about consumption.” He described a complex choreography of decision-making in which various family members can fill the roles of “initiator,” “influencer” and “gatekeeper”— for example, a child suggests a visit to a theme park, one parent suggests which park to visit, and another parent, armed with “veto power,” makes the final decision. This way, an elaborate script leads from the first moment of interest to a final choice. Each stage of the script deserves close attention.

“We have to think about marketing to families, but also marketing through families.”

At the outset, the question is “who is buying for whom?” The plot of the purchase breaks down into additional sub-chapters: the recognition of the need, the information search, and the final decision. The key point from a marketing perspective is to respond to each phase and understand that decisions will play out differently for families and for individuals. According to Ravanas, the complexity is compounded by changes in the structure of family life. But “families have always been changing,” he said. “Whatever our family experience may be, we shouldn’t discount the fact that although the forms are changing, the bonds are as strong as ever.”

When it comes to the actual experience kids will have inside a cultural institution, the trick, according to Ravanas, is keeping all family members happy. Each age group — the child, the older sibling, the parent — has to find something worthwhile in the experience. This is the “layering” that Jeffrey Katzenberg, producer of some of the most successful animated films in history, demanded at Disney. Ravanas recounted the producer’s insight about why Disney films draw large audiences: “We don’t try to make an adult and a kid laugh about the same thing.” Katzenberg had commented. “We want them to laugh at the same time.”

Not all art experiences are meant for children, of course. But according to Julie Charles, associate curator of education at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the days are gone when museums simply assumed, “that the kind of art we present is not kid-appropriate.” The emphasis today, in museums no less than in multiplexes, is on creating shared family experiences. “We’re not interested in having the adults drop off the kids,” said Nancy Price, the museum’s director of marketing and communications.

Another example of this approach is the San Francisco Opera’s recently expanded matinee family presentation series. These performances are specifically designed to help “people get past the perception that the opera is ‘difficult,’” said Marcia Lazer, the opera’s marketing director. The short and affordable performances, sung in English, prove to both children and adults “that opera can be fun,” said Lazer, and some “become fans for life.” Much of their appeal derives from how they allow family members to share and experience activities — the same quality that has made the opera’s outdoor simulcasts in San Francisco’s Civic Center and AT&T Park, which draw crowds of up to 15,000 people, immensely popular.

Appropriate facilities, scheduling and communication channels are just part of the answer to why a child and parent may choose to spend a Saturday afternoon inside an opera house or a museum. A less tangible, but equally important component of successful family outreach is a philosophy of arts education that — contrary to past practice — does not try to “dumb down” arts experiences. “Children are incredibly underestimated,” said choreographer Alonzo King during a conference session devoted to family programming. Later, he elaborated on this: “They are brilliant,” he said, “but formal education can sometimes strip them of their intuitive knowing.” In a passionate defense of creatively and intellectually engaging arts experiences for kids, King posed a question that marketers in all disciplines, and for all age groups, can take to heart. “When I think of the experience of ‘child-sizing’ a work, I wonder: Would Mozart do that? Would Gauguin do that?”

TECHNOLOGY: ASSESSING THE IMPLICATIONS

The San Francisco conference, held in the hotbed of the Internet revolution, devoted significant time to the potential of new technologies and online media to overcome barriers to participation. Technology isn’t a universal solution for attracting audiences, as participants at the conference understood all too well. But it can provide arts presenters with new opportunities. The latest online services are creating new, more interactive and participatory forms of engagement and altering the traditional relationship between arts presenters and their audiences.

Technology’s most immediate promise lies in lowering what economists call the “transactions costs” of linking people to arts experiences — as measured in money, effort, and especially, time. The average American has about five hours of leisure time a day, said Tom Kaiden, chief operating officer of the Greater Philadelphia Cultural Alliance, citing figures from the Bureau of Labor Statistics. That’s more than most people think. Even so, the perception that people are extremely busy causes them to hold off decisions about leisure activities, Kaiden said. As every presenter knows, Americans are pushing ticket purchases back until the last minute. They want flexibility. Online services allow arts groups to be more targeted and effective as they move away from a world of “by appointment” subscription-based attendance, to one where spur-of-the-moment decisions are the norm.

Just a few years ago, Kaiden said, several now-commonplace web tools were beyond the grasp of most cultural organizations. Today, they've adopted many of these tools, including weekly or daily e-mail updates to a wide constituency; web offerings such as restaurant tips and interactive maps to enhance the visitor experience; "viral" marketing in the form of "forward-to-a-friend" information-sharing, not to mention secure and user-friendly online ticketing.

Rich Silverstein, the San Francisco advertising executive, presented a mouthwatering demonstration of what technology can do for arts groups. In an online advertising campaign that his firm had created for a car company, the agency used Global Positioning System technology to take customers on a bird's-eye video tour over planet earth, zooming down on their neighborhood and into the advertised car brand's showroom closest to their home. Never leaving their computer, potential customers could virtually enter the showroom and look at the latest models. Similarly at a number of cultural web sites today, ticket buyers can navigate online into theaters and music halls to preview what they may see from the actual seat they are considering. Tools like this do more than enhance a visitor experience. They may mean the difference between choosing to attend a performance or not.

Technology isn't a universal solution for attracting audiences, but it can provide arts presenters with new opportunities.

Media — old and new — are also subtly reversing the roles of presenters and audience members. "In the past, to hear a song, you had to buy the record or hope to hear it on the radio," said New York Times technology columnist Seth Schiesel, a specialist in video games and digital age culture. Now digital technology has given birth to the rise of participatory culture. According to Schiesel, "people are gravitating toward entertainment formats where they can take an active role in shaping the experience, rather than merely consuming the experience."

So how can arts groups make themselves more relevant in this high-tech environment? Schiesel offered two lessons from online media. First, the social function of many game-playing sites is beginning to eclipse their entertainment function — in other words, people are spending more time chatting with each other than playing the actual game. One goal, then, is to turn the hitherto anonymous and passive agglomeration of audience members into a tight-knit, interactive community. This will not only earn their loyalty and consumer dollars, Schiesel argued, but also encourage them to invite along others. If arts presenters can build interactive communities around their programming, their audience may help them reach even more people — networks have a way of building their own momentum.

The second lesson Schiesel offered concerned where audiences find value in online experiences. He cited another example from the electronic game industry, which for many years had wooed its consumers with the technical wizardry of its products. The result of this marketing strategy was a prolonged industry-wide slump. The revival came when producers started to emphasize the social, interactive and experiential dimension of their games. In other words, instead of highlighting how exciting or advanced the games were, commercials emphasized how good a time people were having together playing the games. Arts presenters can similarly look to online technology to broaden the appeal of arts experiences in ways that encourage audiences to come back for more.

New technologies, in short, are not only a tool for marketing to audiences but also a means to make cultural experiences more communal and participatory, and therefore more meaningful. Achieving those goals, however, is not always easy, several conference participants suggested. Small organizations can find the financial and logistical hurdles especially daunting. The biggest challenge in developing an online community, said Ted Lind, deputy director for education of The Newark Museum in Newark, NJ, is that the technical strategies involved “take considerable staff and resources,” including the time and effort of information technology staffers to set up the web site and keep it up to date. Lind added that using publically available tools can help alleviate some of those burdens.

For example, for an exhibition of amateur photos from the 1920s to the 1960s, the museum set up a page on Flickr, the popular photo-sharing website, and then invited people to post their own snapshots online. “That way,” Lind said, “we invited our patrons to become part of the exhibition.” The benefits of this approach can be measured not only in dollars saved, but also in how audience members took personal ownership of the arts experience.

Something similar happened when the curators of the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in San Francisco set about creating a community artwork that they titled the “Making Peace” project. The idea was to create a very public statement on the subject of peace. Rather than gather and present the material themselves, the curators invited city residents to send in their own ideas and images, using e-mail and mobile communication devices. The materials were assembled into a digital mosaic that ended up being projected on the Center’s wall facing Mission Street, a busy downtown thoroughfare. Connecting as it did online experience with real-life experience, the work could not have had the same effect, nor could it have even come into being, without digital technology.

Technologically sophisticated and already proven resources, such as YouTube and FORA.tv (which gathers lectures and seminars online), and of course, iTunes (which, in addition to providing music, is a clearinghouse for voice and video podcasts), place inexpensive distribution channels at the disposal of arts groups. Another such forum is Second Life, the fast-evolv-

ing online environment where millions of people from around the world move around and interact every day, in the guise of “avatars” (visual representations of themselves or imaginary personages), inside a virtual landscape of cities and buildings. The San Francisco-based Long Now Foundation, which was established as a counterpoint to today’s fast-paced lifestyles and devotes itself to “slower/better thinking,” mounted an installation in Second Life of recording and visual artist Brian Eno’s digital artwork, 77 Million Paintings. Conceived by Eno as “visual music,” the piece is a constantly evolving sound and image-scape that was originally intended to bring art to millions of darkened flat panel TV screens. Being a work of digital art, it posed no obstacle to premiering in the virtual environment of Second Life. Long Now’s name is the first among all the cultural organizations that show up in a Google search for Brian Eno’s artwork.

Conference speakers mentioned a wide range of emerging innovative applications with added potential to cultivate and expand audiences. Gallery talks can now be gotten via mobile phones. Word-of-mouth generators like Flavorpill and the San Francisco Squid List reach large networks of young people with their heavily edited program recommendations. The attraction of these sites is that instead of comprehensive listings they provide only the top “curated” recommendations of their expert editors (a Flavorpill listing can single-handedly sell out a performance). A newcomer, Twitter, allows thousands of people to send and receive tiny, sentence-long messages about their everyday activities.

Together, and when deployed as part of a coordinated strategy, such tools have the potential to reach large new audiences. Organizations seeking to harness the capabilities of the Internet can save costs not only by using existing technology, but also by avoiding common mistakes. According to Alexander Rose, executive director of The Long Now Foundation, too many organizations build a web presence for an event, only to let it disappear after the performance or exhibition is over. When the site disappears, so does the organization’s authoritative presence on the given subject.

RESEARCH: THE NEW MATH

Both marketing and technology rely on a close knowledge of the audience. Without such knowledge, marketing campaigns can end up irrelevant and technology can turn into a waste of financial and human resources. Experts at the conference shared many instances of how arts groups are achieving a more intimate understanding of their visitors — their backgrounds, tastes, motivations and life patterns — and how this is helping them more effectively advance their missions.

Arthur Cohen, chief executive officer of LaPlaca Cohen, a research and marketing firm for cultural organizations, told the gathering that attendance at cultural events is back to pre-September 11 highs and in some cases surpassing them. Museums and theaters are enjoying

especially robust audience gains. According to LaPlaca Cohen's surveys, about three of every four Americans attend at least one cultural event each month.

Research is drawing a clearer picture of what motivates people to engage with the arts. Some of LaPlaca Cohen's findings confirm what other conference speakers said about the experiential appeal of the arts and the need to move beyond traditional marketing methods. People go to arts events because they make them feel good, not because they feel they are supposed to attend or because culture is "good for them." Social influences, in particular word-of-mouth information, are important. Critics still matter in choices about performances. Discounts work, especially for core audiences.

Online marketing is starting to have effects for audiences 65 years of age or older. More arts attendance is linked to tourism.

The "new math" of audience research is that simply counting the overall number of attendees is not enough.

The key consideration in the "new math" of audience research is that simply counting the overall number

of attendees is not enough. Some of the most useful research for arts groups goes further. It can identify the specific characteristics of audience segments so that they can be targeted more precisely. There is increasing diversity in the audience base, said Alan Brown, a principal in the WolfBrown consultancy for nonprofits. "Beyond age and race, consumers have increasingly diverse cultural tastes," he said. "However, many arts organizations offer only one experience. Segmentation is a strategy for addressing this diversity."

There are signs that the arts are catching up with consumer industries that have adjusted their offerings after listening more closely to their customers. One research typology described by Brown identified no less than 10 audience groups based on values that drive participation: mavericks, experientials, remixers, diversity seekers, classical devotees, networked students, blockbusters, critically engaged, faith and family, and finally, serenity seekers. Another segmentation study focused on arts donors. It found five different groups of donors based on their various motivations for giving: intrinsics (people motivated by the art), networkers, co-creators, marquee donors, and youth-focused donors.

Developing a nuanced view of an organization's constituencies can lead to more refined programming and marketing approaches. "Audiences aren't all the same," says Edward Cambron, vice president for marketing and public relations at the Philadelphia Orchestra Association, where a segmentation study prompted the orchestra to rethink how it designs and promotes programs to groups with various tastes, levels of musical knowledge and appetites for new works. Based on these results, the orchestra came up with a new set of concert programs, each meant to appeal to a specific type of audience member.

But a closer understanding of the audience goes beyond charting such demographic and motivational maps. It demands an anthropologist's awareness of how people experience arts. Research by the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston revealed that although some visitors come alone or as couples, the vast majority come in small groups. (The average group size to the museum's After Hours program is 3.3 people.) When officials at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art sought to attract families, they researched an obvious but rarely asked question: What exactly does a "family" mean in the Bay Area? The answers to such simple-sounding questions can lead to refinements in everything from the content of the exhibition and gift shop to the layout of the museum cafeteria.

CONCLUSION: BUILDING AUDIENCES BY EMBRACING CHANGE

The San Francisco sessions made it clear that success lies not simply in prioritizing programming, marketing research or technology, but in moving toward organizational models that derive maximum value and impact out of each of these areas. This demands organizational flexibility. One theme that resonated throughout the Wallace conference was that arts groups need to become learning organizations, continuously generating knowledge about their audiences and adopting the most promising approaches of their peers. "Learning that leads to action is the goal," noted Peter York, director of evaluation of the TCC Group, a consultancy to nonprofits. For York, the main guarantors of such learning are sound leadership, a strong adaptive capacity, technical execution, and an ability to set goals and criteria for measuring progress.

Change can sometimes be painful or controversial. Therefore, the necessary adjustments cannot simply originate from the executive office but need to be embraced throughout the organization, several speakers noted. "It's not enough to invite people to attend your events and classes; you must create a welcoming experience for them," said Connie Wolf, director and chief executive officer of San Francisco's Contemporary Jewish Museum. "It is very important that people like museum guards and volunteers are in on this effort. You have to get everyone on board with this."

Jan Del Sesto, general director of the Boston Lyric Opera, had some concrete advice for managers trying to steer organizations through transitions:

- Encourage everyone in the organization, including board members, and make sure they understand fully that what they have to offer is useful and will be used.
- Ask people to help with hard choices. Don't softball issues; make the trade-offs clear.
- Develop a holistic understanding of your organization's capabilities and weaknesses. Staff and board members should know what goes on behind the scenes and what resources are needed to do the organization's work.
- Bring the audience into the process. Share more information and develop forums, such as dress rehearsals, where the audience gains insight into what happens backstage.

When it comes to connecting to new audiences, the strategies of the most successful arts organizations involve a willingness to embrace transparency and risk. Transparency has to do with the openness and candor of how arts groups speak to their audience. This is largely a question of tone and attitude that avoids arrogance or exclusivity. As Arthur Cohen, the arts marketing expert, put it: “When people say, ‘I don’t get art,’ or ‘It’s boring to me,’ what they mean is, ‘It makes me feel stupid.’ The mistake we make is to treat art as something elevated upon some altar that people must rise up to—rather than as a relevant, organic part of everyday life.”

Cultivating transparency, along with the other necessary dimensions of imaginative marketing, is challenging. So is changing old ways of doing business with the help of research and new technologies. But the many exchanges at this conference demonstrated that arts groups are ready to listen more closely to their audiences and rethink where and how they provide meaning and value to America’s evolving communities. Innovative arts leaders have always known that risk-taking is the only consistently successful strategy for achieving recognition and popularity in the arts.

“Risk is not a negative,” said Connie Wolf of the Contemporary Jewish Museum. “We’re more at risk if we don’t reach out to new audiences in new ways.” ■



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