

# ATTRACTING AN ELUSIVE AUDIENCE

HOW THE SAN FRANCISCO GIRLS CHORUS  
IS BREAKING DOWN STEREOTYPES  
AND GENERATING INTEREST  
AMONG CLASSICAL MUSIC PATRONS

by Bob Harlow, Thomas Alfieri, Aaron Dalton, and Anne Field

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## PREFACE

This case study describes the San Francisco Girls Chorus's efforts to raise its local artistic and cultural profile and draw larger classical music audiences to its performances. It is part of a larger set of four case studies, commissioned by The Wallace Foundation, of arts organizations' efforts to reach new audiences and deepen relationships with current audiences.

These studies come at a time of particular urgency. According to the National Endowment for the Arts' *2008 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts*, American adults' participation in key activities such as attending live performances and visiting museums is at its lowest levels since the survey began tracking it in 1982.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, the arts audience has grown older than the general population. The message is clear: Arts organizations need to attract and engage new audiences to ensure their artistic and financial viability.

Yet the work of these four organizations and the case study investigations describing them was undertaken not with a view that actual *interest* in the arts is waning, but with a hope, shared by many, that we are witnessing a dynamic shift in participation, both in amount and in form. Much evidence suggests that Americans are longing to take part in the arts but want to do

1. National Endowment for the Arts, *Surveys of Public Participation in the Arts 2008* (Washington, D.C.: National Endowment for the Arts, 2009), 2–3.

so beyond how we have come to define (or measure) participation.<sup>2</sup> Twenty-first-century Americans may be looking for a more interactive or participatory experience, for example.<sup>3</sup> In response, inventive organizations are trying to share their art in ways that help their mission and resources dovetail with the preferences and lifestyles of potential audiences.

The cases describe and evaluate newly launched or expanded participation-building programs designed and implemented by four organizations involved in different artistic disciplines: the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Steppenwolf Theatre Company, the San Francisco Girls Chorus, and Boston Lyric Opera. They lay out how these efforts were created and run and also identify strategic and tactical elements driving results. In the process, we explore such questions as: What program and organizational factors produce success? What are the costs, benefits, and trade-offs associated with building participation? What is the broader impact on arts organizations that undertake it?

Each case study in the series includes background information on each organization and the events that led to its participation-building program. The case studies begin with a brief synopsis, much like an abstract, and a “scene-setter,” describing an actual component of that program. A section summarizing the specific participation-building challenges faced by the organization and the program it built to address them follows. Then we include more detail about strategy, tactics, and key decisions made as the organization developed its approach. We detail both

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2. Steven J. Tepper and Yang Gao, “Engaging Art: What Counts?,” in *Engaging Art: The Next Great Transformation of America’s Cultural Life*, eds. Steven J. Tepper and Bill Ivey (New York: Routledge, 2008), 17–47.

3. See, for example, Henry Jenkins and Vanessa Bertozzi, “Artistic Expression in the Age of Participatory Culture: How and Why Young People Create,” in *Engaging Art: The Next Great Transformation of America’s Cultural Life*, eds. Steven J. Tepper and Bill Ivey (New York: Routledge, 2008), 171–195.

how program outcomes were measured and their results, and provide an evaluative analysis of those results, highlighting the key drivers behind them. Finally, we pose central questions for arts organizations to consider if they’re facing similar audience challenges or weighing the possibility of implementing programs like those described in the case study.

The case studies are the product of multiple interviews with key staff and an analysis of program elements, budgets, and planning documents, as well as qualitative and quantitative research undertaken by independent consultants and the organizations themselves to inform and evaluate their own efforts. We also examined a wide variety of indicators, such as ticket purchase, online activity, and participation in a broad array of programming.

Ultimately, there are limits to the general conclusions we can draw from the case studies: These were not scientifically controlled experiments. And each of the four organizations studied designed different programs aimed at different target audiences. Nonetheless, we can discern some general principles that other arts organizations can learn from and adopt.

**1. Market research can sharpen engagement-strategy development and execution.** Organizations that want to engage new audiences or deepen existing relationships need to understand what audiences are looking for. Many of the organizations profited by using market research to identify more precisely how current and potential audiences think about their organizations, how they think about the kind of art they provide, and the experience those audiences are seeking. For some professionals, especially artistic and programming staff, soliciting audience opinion runs the risk of overtly pandering to public taste, thereby sacrificing artistic integrity (sometimes referred to as “dumbing down”). But listening to

participants can provide observations needed to create innovative, creative, and deeply engaging programs—insights that, for these organizations, sometimes revealed an unexpected level of sophistication among audience members as well. Artistic staff at Steppenwolf and the San Francisco Girls Chorus even found that audiences welcomed bolder artistic choices; the artistic mission was fortified.

The case studies suggest that rigorous research, even though it may not yet be the norm in arts organizations, is crucial to understanding audiences and evaluating progress. It isn't enough, for example, to make assumptions based on ticket sales. Listening to audiences means conducting well-constructed research to pinpoint what they're looking for from your art form and your organization. It requires doing both quantitative and qualitative studies to inform strategy, evaluate results, and make course corrections on the road to meeting participation-building objectives. In uncertain economic times, when every dollar counts, such research is especially important to ensure that participation-building programs are structured correctly and are on track.

**2. Audiences are open to engaging the arts in new and different ways.** All of the organizations were successful when they provided new avenues for audiences to find a “way in” to their art. For example:

- Creating unique social gatherings that encourage discussions around the art collection, as at *Gardner After Hours*
- Facilitating critical thinking and dialogue about theater, as Steppenwolf has done on its website and in post-show discussions
- Providing interactive and educational programs to introduce new audiences to the arts, like the Boston Lyric Opera's preview program, which gives children (and many adults) a first-time glimpse into the workings of

opera in a familiar and comfortable setting

- Using visual communications to telegraph an unexpected level of professionalism and artistic sophistication, as the San Francisco Girls Chorus has done in its carefully designed marketing communications makeover

**3. Participation-building is ongoing, not a one-time initiative.** Cultivating audiences is an effort that can never be viewed as finished. The organizations studied continue to fine-tune their programs, and even alter program objectives as they learn more about their audiences or as the relationships with audiences change. After making strides toward creating a dialogue with existing audience members, Steppenwolf Theatre Company is opening the conversation to an even wider spectrum of new theatergoers; the Gardner Museum continues to examine and revise a program that has exceeded its expectations; the San Francisco Girls Chorus is investigating how it can encourage repeat visits from the new audience of classical music patrons it has attracted; Boston Lyric Opera is reviewing matters related to performance location and strategic partnerships as critical determinants of programs to bring opera to young people.

**4. Audience-building efforts should be fully integrated into every element of an organization, not a separate initiative or program.**

That means they can't be run by just one or two departments or as add-on initiatives unrelated to the overall mission. When participation-building objectives are embraced by the entire organization and conceptualized and implemented as an outgrowth of the overall mission, staff can have clarity of purpose, and visitors an “authentic” or deeply felt experience, and the institution's goals can be most fully realized.

**5. Mission is critical.** Programs that emerge from an organization's mission, when that mission is clear and supported throughout the organization, develop in an environment in

which they can thrive. At the same time, these programs are better able to provide the rich experiences audiences are looking for, because they draw on and offer to the public those things about which organizations care most.<sup>4</sup> The Gardner Museum and Steppenwolf Theatre Company in particular built rich programs around their unique missions and philosophies about experiencing art. As a result, their programs have connected audiences more deeply with their art, and have attracted new audiences in large numbers.

Finally, we hope these case studies inspire. These programs demonstrate what is possible with strategic thinking and solid implementation. They prove that arts organizations don't have to be victims of a trend, but instead can be masters of their destinies, contributing to a vigorous, thriving, and viable artistic community.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

**A** great many individuals and organizations assisted us in our research, and we want to give them our heartfelt thanks. First, this work would not have been possible without the generous support of The Wallace Foundation. We would also like to express our appreciation for their guidance and support to The Wallace Foundation staff members Lucas Held and Pamela Mendels, as well as former staff members Catherine Fukushima, Rory McPherson, and Mary Trudel. Ann Stone of The Wallace Foundation tirelessly provided invaluable strategic guidance and

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4. B. Joseph Pine II and James H. Gilmore, "Museums and Authenticity," *Museum News* 86 (2007): 76-80, <http://www.aam-us.org/pubs/mn/authenticity.cfm>. Pine and Gilmore suggest that in a world of increasing competition for leisure time, people are looking for strong experiences. They suggest that arts organizations can render such strong experiences if they stay true to themselves and express a strong identity outward.

insight from the project's beginnings to its final conclusions.

We offer our sincere thanks to the staffs and boards of the four organizations we studied. Their candor will, we trust, pay important dividends in the form of additional knowledge about what works and does not in engaging audiences. We were fortunate to have liaisons at each of the four organizations who helped us work through the details and dedicated much of their own time to ensuring that the case studies were as informative as possible. These include Peggy Burchenal and Julie Crites at the Gardner Museum, Melanie Smith and Polly Springhorn of the San Francisco Girls Chorus, Judith McMichael and Julie House of Boston Lyric Opera, and Linda Garrison of Steppenwolf Theatre Company. As we sought to formulate the key questions and identify critical learnings from the cases, we were also fortunate to have extensive feedback on strategic direction and conclusions from several leading arts practitioners, including Jim Hirsch of the Chicago Sinfonietta, Molly Smith of Arena Stage, Kelly Tweeddale of Seattle Opera, Laura Sweet of the Ordway Center for the Performing Arts, Bonnie Pitman of the Dallas Museum of Art, and Stephanie Hughley of the New Jersey Performing Arts Center. Finally, Sandra Radoff and Mari Henninger provided important technical assistance as we examined the data the organizations collected. Of course, the final responsibility for the questions posed and conclusions drawn rests with us.

*Bob Harlow*

## SUMMARY

**M**any high-caliber arts organizations struggle to achieve recognition and to attract audiences. But organizations that lack public awareness or strong reputations are not condemned to accept the status quo. With proper research and targeted action, organizations can improve their image and raise awareness to attract their desired audiences.

The San Francisco Girls Chorus (SFGC) found itself struggling to diversify beyond “friends and family” audiences. Despite producing high-quality, award-winning vocal music, SFGC had difficulty attracting large numbers of classical music patrons to its concert series in the San Francisco Bay Area. Focus group research revealed that classical music patrons were generally unaware of the artistic potential of girls choruses in general, and the SFGC in particular.

Determined to improve its local image and awareness to match its performance level, SFGC has embarked on a focused rebranding campaign. The Chorus is overhauling its marketing materials, finding new performance venues, and refining the way it presents its choral programming to project better the image of a world-class performing arts organization. Thanks to these efforts, SFGC is beginning to make inroads in its goal of attracting greater numbers of classical music patrons.

The rebranding campaign involves more than just changes in logo or marketing materials, but represents a refocusing of

SFGC's identity on artistic excellence in performing. To successfully execute the rebranding, SFGC's leaders have had to invest time and resources in building an organizational consensus and recalibrating the focus of the board to define SFGC first and foremost as a world-class performing arts organization.

SFGC's leaders have navigated the organization through this potentially disruptive transition by creating an atmosphere of transparency and collaboration. Although early signs suggest that SFGC has achieved some success in attracting its target audience of San Francisco classical music patrons, the organization has faced bumps along the way. SFGC's commitment to defining itself as a world-class performing arts organization is a long-term one that will continue to play a major role in key operational decisions around programming, marketing, and performance venues in years to come.

## A PRESIDENTIAL PERFORMANCE

*Jan. 20, 2009. The frigid temperatures cannot stop an estimated crowd of more than one million citizens from gathering to witness the historic inauguration of Barack Obama as president of the United States.*

*To serenade the president and the audience, some of the top entertainers in the country have been invited to perform—Aretha Franklin, classical stars Yo-Yo Ma and Itzhak Perlman, the United States Marine Band, and forty-three members of the performing ensemble of the San Francisco Girls Chorus.*

*A girls chorus at the presidential inauguration? For many classical music lovers, the very words “girls chorus” call to mind little girls singing a medley of basic tunes—Christmas carols, show tunes, Disney songs—in a church basement while an audience of friends and family shifts uncomfortably on folding chairs before adjourning for punch and cookies.*

*Yet here stood the young ladies of SFGC, puncturing that tired stereotype as they joined with the San Francisco Boys Chorus to deliver crowd-pleasing renditions of “America the Beautiful” and jazz great Oscar Peterson’s “Hymn to Freedom” in front of not just the massive live audience but also tens of millions of TV viewers.*

*And yet, despite this tour de force performance, despite winning multiple Grammy Awards for its collaborations with the San Francisco Symphony, despite its world tours, its CD releases, its concerts with guest artists, its commissions of new choral works, and its world-class musicianship, many of the classical music lovers in its San Francisco Bay Area home market still had never heard of the group*

*or been to its concerts. They still heard the words “girls chorus” and thought of punch and cookies in a church basement.*

*How could SFGC overcome that stereotype and raise its profile in its home market? How could the organization help local classical music audiences see past their preconceptions to discover that the Chorus was making the sort of music those audiences loved to hear? And perhaps even more important, how could SFGC make sure that it did not inadvertently reinforce that same stereotype in the way it presented itself through its communications and its choice of venues, programming, or even concessions?*

*These were the stark questions facing Executive Director Melanie Smith as she sought to expand SFGC’s audience and gain recognition, respect, and attendance from local classical music lovers.*

## **THE CHALLENGE: POOR AWARENESS, LOW AUDIENCE EXPECTATIONS**

**A** few years ago the San Francisco Girls Chorus (SFGC) confronted two major issues that afflict many amateur arts organizations, particularly those whose art form is less well known—low awareness and misperceptions about the quality of its work.

San Francisco is a city filled with classical music fans, but SFGC still wrestled with low awareness among the classical music patrons most likely to appreciate its choral performances.<sup>1</sup> Despite winning awards from the American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers (ASCAP) and appearing on five Grammy Award–winning classical music recordings, SFGC still did not attract significant numbers of the patrons who regularly purchased tickets to other classical music concerts in the San Francisco Bay Area. Friends and family of chorus members made up most of the audience at SFGC performances.

When Melanie Smith joined SFGC as executive director in 2006, she brought a determination to change the status quo by raising the organization’s cultural and artistic profile in San Francisco to match its artistic prowess and recognition in the choral world.

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1. In other arts contexts, a “patron” may be a major donor or contributor, but in this case study, the term “classical music patron” should be understood simply to mean a person who is an enthusiastic classical music devotee and who regularly attends classical music performances.

Together Smith and Artistic Director Susan McMane took steps to challenge the stereotypical and (they believed) inaccurate assumptions held by local audiences about the kind of performance that a girls chorus could deliver.

Guided by market research with their target audience, Smith directed a comprehensive rebranding campaign that included all outward-facing elements of SFGC, from marketing

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### **SAN FRANCISCO GIRLS CHORUS AT A GLANCE**

- Mission: to create outstanding performances featuring the unique and compelling sound of young women's voices through an exemplary music education program
- Founded in 1978
- The Chorus consists of forty-five girls ages twelve to eighteen, selected by audition, who have completed the four-level SFGC School program
- Performance schedule includes a four-concert season, as well as a holiday concert, a fund-raising spring gala, guest appearances, and international tours
- SFGC Chorus School trains more than 350 girls ages five to sixteen at two campuses in San Francisco and Berkeley
- Executive Director: Melanie Smith
- Artistic Director and SFGC Conductor: Dr. Susan McMane
- Chorus School Director: Elizabeth Avakian
- Operating budget 2009-2010: \$2.5 million
- Total audience 2009-2010
  - SFGC concerts: 4,865
  - SFGC concerts plus guest appearances: 100,000

materials to performance venues to the content and staging of the performances themselves.

As a result of these initiatives, SFGC has made important strides toward reshaping its audience, diversifying beyond friends and family to attract greater numbers of classical music patrons who had never before attended SFGC concerts. Audience cultivation is an ongoing, cumulative process, and SFGC still has considerable work to do to continue to attract and retain this new category of audience members. The organization as a whole as well is still working through internal changes as it more firmly defines itself as a center of artistic excellence. Nonetheless, SFGC's early success shows that arts organizations can hope to make inroads with even their most elusive audiences.

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE SFGC

In 1978 the general director of the San Francisco Opera, Kurt Herbert Adler, asked Elizabeth Appling to teach some girls to sing the children's chorus roles in Tchaikovsky's opera *The Queen of Spades*. Appling founded SFGC to meet Adler's request and also to fulfill her vision of an independent, world-class chorus of young treble voices and a school capable of supplying a steady stream of talent to this chorus.

More than three decades later, SFGC still maintains a professional-level repertory ensemble of forty-five girls ages twelve to eighteen. SFGC presents a home season of four concerts per year—two separate concerts each performed in two locations, one in San Francisco and the other in the East Bay. In addition, it presents a holiday concert and a fund-raising spring gala; appears as a guest artist with the San Francisco Symphony, San Francisco Opera, and Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra; and tours internationally every few years.

To provide SFGC with vocalists having the technical skills needed to perform at a superior level, the San Francisco Girls Chorus School provides first-rate music education for girls from a variety of cultural and economic backgrounds. The Chorus is assembled from girls who have completed the highest levels of the Chorus School's training.

McMane, who serves as both SFGC artistic director and SFGC conductor, believes that SFGC has a responsibility to add to the repertoire for treble voices. Therefore SFGC commissions

## TRAINING FUTURE CHORAL ARTISTS— THE SFGC SCHOOL

The SFGC School is an evening and weekend program that separates its students into four levels based on their artistic ability. Most girls enter the school at Level I with the goal of progressing through all four levels (typically at the rate of one level every one or two years) and eventually earning membership in the SFGC through an audition.

During the 2009–2010 academic year, the SFGC School enrolled more than 350 students on its two campuses in San Francisco and Berkeley. Students ranging in age from five to sixteen receive education in vocal technique, music theory, music history, sight singing, and performance style. School schedules typically follow the academic calendar and run from September to June.

The SFGC School charges basic school tuition of \$2,000 per academic year. The SFGC School provides discounts for families with more than one child at the Chorus School and offers a scholarship program to encourage girls from all economic backgrounds to apply.

at least one new work per year from prominent American composers. These new works are then performed and often recorded by the Chorus.

## **RAISING THE PROFILE OF A WORLD-CLASS CHORAL GROUP**

In 2006, Smith became SFGC executive director at a time when both the performers and the organization's staff had identified a disturbing disconnect between SFGC's reputation within the choral arts community and its image among the city's classical music audience.

On the one hand, SFGC received recognition from its peers in choral arts communities around the world and entertained classical music audiences in San Francisco through its collaborations with arts organizations such as the San Francisco Symphony and the San Francisco Opera. On the other hand, SFGC could not draw those same San Francisco classical music lovers to its own mainstage concerts. At SFGC local concerts, friends and family of the performers made up most of the audience. In short, local San Francisco classical music audiences did not recognize SFGC as a center of artistic excellence in its own right.

Smith believed that SFGC could continue to operate by relying on the revenue and reputation of the highly regarded educational program in its chorus school. But she also felt that SFGC had the potential to attract new audiences, board members, guest artists, financial support, students, and staff by increasing its local artistic and cultural relevance. To achieve that relevance, Smith felt that SFGC would need to draw the sort of classical music audiences who regularly attended concerts of the San

Francisco Symphony, San Francisco Opera, and the Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra to its own local performances. "At the end of the day, it's about the concert, including who is in attendance and who is appreciating it," says Smith.

Smith also assumed that the SFGC could rely on its existing friends and family audience for long-term support, but that it had little potential to expand the size of this group. New family members might join the audience when their daughters, sisters, or nieces entered the school, but this growth would be offset by attrition among family members who lost interest as their relatives left the Chorus. To grow the overall size of SFGC's audience, Smith knew she would need to attract audience members whose primary interest was musical rather than personal or familial.

## **FOCUSING IDENTITY ON ARTISTIC EXCELLENCE**

**P**roviding world-class performances had been a respected and valued part of SFGC's identity ever since Appling founded the organization in the 1970s. But over time the organization's attention had gradually shifted toward the school, which brought in more revenue, required more space, and involved a larger number of stakeholders than the Chorus. The majority of girls and families involved with the organization were connected to the Chorus School, not the performing ensemble. As the voices of the school's stakeholders grew more numerous and more powerful, the organization began to focus more on the benefits the school provided to the girls who studied there—not just education, but also camaraderie, lifelong friendships, and fun.

While Smith appreciated the ways in which the Chorus School enriched the lives of its students, she wanted to bring the organization back to its roots by shifting SFGC's center of gravity and its identity closer toward the performing element of the organization. "Our founder always intended our mission to be about performance," says Smith. That mission, specifically, is "to create outstanding performances featuring the unique and compelling sound of young women's voices through an exemplary music education program." Smith wanted to see the SFGC's outward identity focused first on performance excellence, with the Chorus School's rigorous musical training providing the high

level of talent the Chorus demanded. She knew that for that identity to be accepted, SFGC's internal strategy would also need to be focused first on artistic excellence.

Smith understood that her efforts to clarify the primacy of SFGC's identity as a performance organization could cause some internal friction with those who identified more strongly with the educational aspects of the organization. Complicating matters, SFGC had just completed a four-year, \$8 million capital campaign that focused on the need to find a permanent home for the Chorus School. The campaign ultimately culminated in the purchase of the Kanbar Performing Arts Center in the Hayes Valley district of San Francisco, which serves as a school campus for SFGC and also provides staff offices and rehearsal spaces for the Chorus. The capital campaign may have had the unintended consequence of reinforcing the notion of the Chorus School as SFGC's primary identity.

## THE DISCONNECT: FEW CLASSICAL MUSIC PATRONS AT SFGC PERFORMANCES

**F**or years, SFGC staff had lamented the organization's inability to attract classical music patrons. If SFGC was providing world-class performances, why wasn't it more widely known and appreciated by the classical music audience? Why were concerts still mostly attended only by friends and family members of the singers? Smith knew anecdotally that when classical music patrons did somehow find their way to an SFGC concert, they were typically pleasantly surprised and impressed by the quality of the musical experience.

Staff at all levels assumed that classical music audiences had a negative stereotype of youth choruses, believing all such organizations to be amateur training grounds for adult choral music rather than recognizing that music for treble voices is a unique and fully realized art form in its own right. "Some potential audience members—and even some parents—think that a young people's chorus performs Disney songs or show tunes," says McMane. "That is not what the San Francisco Girls Chorus is about."

Smith shared her colleagues' concerns that classical music audiences did not attend Chorus performances because they misunderstood both the singers' talents and the artistic significance of girls choruses. She suspected that San Francisco's classical music audiences not only lacked awareness of SFGC itself, but

also had no idea of the unique and amazing sounds that trained girls choruses were capable of producing.

Smith believed that the Chorus's repertoire and skills far exceeded what classical music audiences might expect from a girls chorus, but she also understood that appearances could reinforce or destroy audience stereotypes. She worried that SFGC was inadvertently undermining its efforts to appeal to classical music patrons through the *non*-musical elements of its performances—the venues, the ticketing process, the seating system, and so forth.

To illustrate her point, Smith recalls her first experience with the Chorus at its twentieth anniversary celebration in 1999 at San Francisco's Davies Symphony Hall. "I was blown away by the quality of the sound," she says. "It was the greatest unknown thing I had ever heard." Beyond the acoustics of the hall, Smith says that hearing SFGC perform in the home of the San Francisco Symphony conferred a "sense of occasion" upon the event.

Just before Smith formally took the reins at SFGC as executive director in 2006, she went unannounced to a spring 2006 concert that took place at a San Francisco church. This time the concert site was marked with a sidewalk sandwich board decked out in balloons. The ushers were young girls. The seats were marked in a confusing way. The program itself had the appearance of a church bulletin. "The setting and the ambience were a mismatch with the artistic experience that I remembered," says Smith. "None of these things detracted in any way from the quality of the music, but they all told a story about the organization and set the tone for the performance."

## USING MARKET RESEARCH TO IDENTIFY AUDIENCE ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT CHORAL GROUP PERFORMANCES

**A**lthough Smith, McMane, and other SFGC staff had their suspicions and intuitive explanations for SFGC's lack of popularity and visibility among classical music patrons, Smith did not want to base her organizational strategy on suspicions. She knew that she needed data and evidence in order to suggest big changes in the way SFGC presented itself to the world. "We needed cold, hard research," says Smith. "We had to figure out why the types of people who would appreciate our art were not coming to our performances. Did they not know who we are? Or did they not know what we could do?"

Smith knew that this kind of market research, while critical to making accurate strategic decisions, required an investment of funds that exceeded the resources within SFGC's annual operating budget. Smith identified this and three other critical areas where additional funding would be required:

1. Conducting market research to explore perceptions of girls choruses in general and of SFGC in particular. This research would focus on classical music patrons, but Smith also wanted to make sure the organization had an accurate understanding of the views of other key

stakeholders, including the parents of young girls (i.e., parents of potential future SFGC students and Chorus members) and SFGC alumnae.

2. Promoting continued artistic excellence by enriching performances through collaborations with other professional San Francisco performing arts organizations, appearances with guest artists, and original commissions of new works that expanded the choral repertoire.
3. Enabling staff and consultants to spend time managing and facilitating a rebranding of SFGC as primarily a world-class performance organization.
4. Upgrading the website and other marketing materials.

In 2007, the Girls Chorus applied for and received a Wallace Excellence Award that covered these funding needs with a four-year, \$489,000 grant.

The Wallace Excellence Award program was created to fund arts organizations' participation-building programs. One stipulation is that recipients must set aside a portion of the award (at least 10%) for collecting and analyzing data to support their participation-building strategies. Smith was particularly pleased by this requirement. She believed that research was crucial to charting an accurate strategic course, but she was concerned that some of her colleagues in the organization might prefer to act on their assumptions rather than face the unpleasant experience of listening to negative perceptions of the Chorus from target audiences. Instead of having to spend valuable time and energy building internal agreement on the importance of research, the Excellence Award's research requirement allowed Smith to leapfrog this discussion and move straight into the research-planning phase.

In April of 2008, SFGC took the first critical step toward

attracting its new target audience by conducting focus group research with San Francisco classical music patrons. SFGC began by identifying its ideal audience member, assembling three focus groups comprised of classical music patrons who had attended at least two classical music performances over the past year in San Francisco, but who had never attended one of SFGC's own performances.<sup>2</sup>

Among other things, the focus group discussions explored participants' perceptions of choral music and choral groups in general, experience with particular choral organizations, and awareness and perceptions of SFGC based on actual knowledge of the organization or associations with its name and genre. In addition, focus group members participated in a guided visualization exercise designed to explore both their rational and emotional perceptions of an SFGC concert by imagining such things as their reactions to being invited to an SFGC concert, what the venue would look like, what they would see onstage, the performance, and their feelings after the event. They compared their imagined reactions to what they usually seek in performances and identified questions they would need answered about SFGC in order to feel interested in attending one of its performances.

To understand whether SFGC's existing marketing materials communicated the intended messages and brand image, focus group participants were asked to react to the SFGC home page, the current brochure, and brochures from select prior seasons. Finally, to identify what elements of the Chorus might have most appeal for classical music patrons, the group was asked to

2. Respondents were recruited from lists provided by the San Francisco Opera, San Francisco Performances (a classical music and dance presenting organization), San Francisco Symphony, and Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra, and met several additional qualifications, including an income of \$50,000 or more (for single respondents) or household income of \$100,000 or more (married or living with partner), ages twenty-five to sixty-four, college graduate, and an openness to attending choral music. Focus group participants were not excluded if they had attended a San Francisco Opera or San Francisco Symphony performance at which SFGC members performed in a supporting role.

respond to several positioning statements that could be used to describe SFGC.

The focus groups yielded two key findings about the perceptual barriers that SFGC faced:

### **1. FOCUS GROUP FINDING NO. 1: LOW AWARENESS AND LOW EXPECTATIONS OF GIRLS CHORUSES**

**A**s Smith had suspected, most classical music patrons in the focus groups had little or no awareness of girls choruses or SFGC. In fact, while classical music patrons could think of many choruses composed of adults and boys (e.g., Vienna Boys Choir, Mormon Tabernacle Choir, San Francisco Gay Men's Chorus, Chanticleer), there were no girls choruses with high top-of-mind awareness among the target audience.

The classical music patrons in the focus groups assumed that girls choruses were youthful training grounds or "glee club"-type groups with amateur performance standards. In general, the classical music patrons held negative views of girls choruses despite the fact that some focus group participants knew that SFGC members occasionally performed with the San Francisco Symphony and San Francisco Opera. But even those classical music patrons who had seen SFGC members in those contexts had low awareness that SFGC produced its own concerts and had not considered attending an SFGC concert.

"Even if they've heard SFGC members sing Mahler with [San Francisco Symphony Music Director] Michael Tilson Thomas, they cannot connect the dots to conclude that we can present a concert that they might want to attend," explains Smith. "Our challenge was to help audiences understand that we are a legitimate professional organization with girls who are artists capable of creating compelling performances of the highest quality that would fulfill the expectations of classical music patrons."

## 2. FOCUS GROUP FINDING NO. 2: SFGC CONCERTS ASSUMED TO BE AMATEURISH

Since focus group participants had not attended any SFGC concerts, their assumptions about SFGC were based largely on the “Girls Chorus” name. Most of the participants imagined that concert programs would consist of a series of short pieces or songs drawn from genres they would not enjoy, such as pop music or children’s songs. They did not know that the Chorus had mastered long, elaborate pieces in several genres and multiple languages that they performed with renowned guest artists.

When asked to visualize what an SFGC concert would be like, focus group participants imagined it would be boring, because it would be overly structured and lack energy, variation, expression, or movement. They imagined a symmetrical block of girls standing and singing as one. Few respondents imagined a solo performance or any sort of dramatic intensity in the performance.

Focus group participants also imagined a matinee event in a small, unprofessional venue. They assumed SFGC typically held its concerts in church basements with audience members sitting on folding chairs. Frankly, some of these assumptions had some truth to them. SFGC did hold some of its concerts in church venues, thereby unwittingly reinforcing some unfavorable assumptions held by classical music patrons.<sup>3</sup>

Disturbingly, it turned out that SFGC’s marketing materials actually reinforced focus group participants’ assumptions that SFGC lacked professionalism. The marketing materials featured pictures of the girls singing while standing on risers and wear-

3. In San Francisco, classical music patrons recognized certain specific churches as proper performance venues, but SFGC did not regularly perform at churches that belonged to this established “acceptable” subset.

ing their Chorus uniforms. The website included group photos with the Golden Gate Bridge as a background, looking more like a school class trip than an award-winning choral ensemble. Focus group participants felt these images validated their assumptions of SFGC as a girls club that produced amateur-level performances. Classical music patrons in the focus groups responded more positively to less formal close-up photos of individual SFGC members or small groups of performers. These closer photos allowed the focus group members to see the intense emotion and engagement on the performers’ faces.

## 3. FOCUS GROUP FINDING NO. 3: ENGAGING CLASSICAL MUSIC PATRONS

Instead of blaming classical music patrons for their misperceptions of girls choruses and their inaccurate views of SFGC’s performance abilities, Smith recognized that her organization would simply have to overcome these perceptual barriers if it wanted to diversify its audience. The focus groups gave SFGC actionable information on ways to challenge assumptions about girls choruses and overcome the perceptual barriers keeping classical music patrons away from SFGC concerts. The focus groups revealed that SFGC would need to fulfill the following three criteria in order to establish a professional-level reputation among its target audience of classical music patrons.

*Criterion No. 1:* Maintain professional, high-quality artistic standards by:

- a. Offering substantial, interesting, and challenging programming that classical music audiences want to hear
- b. Offering the prospect of a visually engaging experience featuring movement, props, and/or guest artists

- c. Offering contrast (as opposed to just a harmonious blending of voices) by including a dynamic piece, soloist, or instrumental or vocal guest artist

*Criterion No. 2:* Hold performances at respected venues where classical audiences feel at home

*Criterion No. 3:* Build a clear, consistent, and compelling brand identity that communicates sophistication and artistic excellence

Smith and McMane believed that SFGC already performed at a level that fulfilled the high-quality artistic criterion on this list. SFGC's concerts regularly included long, multi-movement works in various languages. The chorus had recently received two ASCAP Awards for Adventurous Programming, validation that it could deliver the types of interesting and provocative experiences featuring renowned guest artists that classical music audiences craved.

If SFGC was already fulfilling Criterion No. 1, then only elements 2 and 3 stood between SFGC and the new audience of classical music patrons the organization wished to attract. Using the information from the focus group findings, Smith and McMane formulated a plan to raise SFGC's profile and change the perceptions of its target audience by projecting an identity that accurately reflected the sophisticated repertoire and strong technical skills of the Chorus. The organization would also need to find venues that reinforced this identity and showcased SFGC as a professional-caliber performing arts ensemble.

## USING FOCUS GROUP FINDINGS TO CHANGE PERCEPTIONS

### 1. FIRST STEP: REBRANDING MARKETING MATERIALS TO CONNOTE ARTISTIC EXCELLENCE

SFGC had engaged a marketing consultant, Scott Horton, to help incorporate the focus group results into reformulated marketing materials. Horton believed the SFGC had a history of practicing what he calls "de facto branding" for the Chorus: developing season brochures based on each season's programming themes without properly considering how to use the marketing materials to build and reinforce a strong and consistent brand from one year to the next.

Horton knew that marketing materials should sell not just individual concerts, but also the *idea* of the Chorus as a serious professional performing group. In the summer of 2008, he and Smith used the focus group findings to project SFGC's brand image as a world-class performing ensemble perfectly suited for classical music audiences. Working with the broader SFGC marketing team, Horton and Smith identified five words they wanted their target audience to associate with the Chorus:

- Empowered
- Classic
- Beautiful
- Exciting
- Sophisticated

SFGC would change the look and feel of its marketing materials, including its seasonal brochure and website, to get the target audience to develop these associations (see Figure 1/Colorplate 1, Pre- and Post-Rebranding Season Brochures; and Figure 2/Colorplates 2 and 3, Pre- and Post-Rebranding Website Home Pages). Smith and Horton chose two main visual themes as the cornerstones of their desired brand identity:

**1. Classical female statuary.** SFGC’s marketing team made the decision to prominently feature timeless classical images of femininity. Images of female statues were selected to evoke the serene voices of Chorus members while also forging a link with the classical Western tradition from which the Chorus drew most of its repertoire. Since classical music patrons held that repertoire in high regard, strengthening associations between SFGC and the Western classical music canon could bolster SFGC’s appeal with that target audience.

**2. Close-ups.** Focus group participants had told researchers that formation poses and group shots made the Chorus members seem amateurish. By contrast, the focus groups had a favorable reaction to tighter shots that allowed them to see the emotion and intensity on the faces of individual singers. SFGC decided to use close-up shots that would properly depict Chorus members as performing artists.

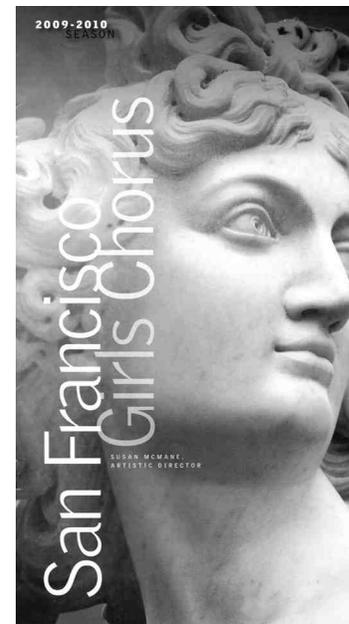
SFGC deployed its new marketing strategy beginning with the promotional materials for the 2008–2009 season and has continued to reinforce this brand image in subsequent years.

Moving into 2010–2011, SFGC evolved the look of its marketing materials by using a commercial photographer (the first time it did so) to create custom images for its brochures, the website, and other external-facing communications. This photographer, RJ Muna, specializes in photos of people in motion. SFGC hopes to show the girls more fluidly—not in static poses on the

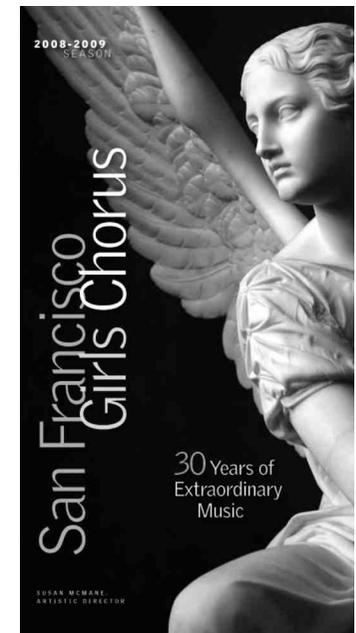
**Figure 1. Pre- and Post-Rebranding Season Brochures**



*Before (2002–2003)*



*After (2008–2009)*



*After (2009–2010)*

**Figure 2. Pre- and Post-Rebranding Website Home Pages**



*Before*



*After (2010-2011)*

risers, but in dramatic photos with high contrast.

Smith hopes that these images will portray the girls in a new way that will transcend some of the stereotypes of the girls chorus genre. Muna's art photography uses a studio background and digital processing to create a look and feel that continues and extends SFGC's earlier branding efforts based on statues with classical feminine imagery. Instead of portraying "sweet girls singing," Muna's photos project the image of a cool, cutting-edge organization, evoking an image that is somewhat serious and even a little bit edgy to show the SFGC performers as sophisticated artists.

## **2. SECOND STEP: DEPLOYING A TARGETED MARKETING CAMPAIGN**

To get the new brochure to the audience of classical music patrons who were not yet attending SFGC performances, SFGC tapped into a shared direct-mail database of Bay Area arts patrons called the Big List. This database is similar to other Big Lists in several large U.S. cities. It is a direct-mail audience database with information on approximately 500,000 subscribers and single-ticket buyers collected from more than 100 arts organizations in the San Francisco Bay Area, including several classical music organizations. It was developed by Theatre Bay Area and sponsored by The Wallace Foundation through the San Francisco Foundation and Grants for the Arts/SF Hotel Tax Fund. Among other advantages, the Big List allows organizations to filter patrons of other organizations according to their tastes and preferences, as indicated by ticket purchase behavior. For its 2008-2009 brochure mailing, SFGC supplemented its internal mailing list database of 9,000 names with an additional 24,000 names of audience members who had attended classical music

performances at other organizations in San Francisco, accessed from the Big List.

Specifically, SFGC pulled names from a mix of single-ticket buyers and subscribers to the San Francisco Opera, Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra, San Francisco Choral Artists, San Francisco Choral Society, San Francisco Lyric Opera, San Francisco Bach Choir, Chanitcleer, and American Bach Soloists. In addition, SFGC added names to its mailing list from Cal Performances and the Berkeley Symphony, neither of which participates in the Big List. These classical music patrons all received the SFGC season brochure via direct mail. For the 2009–2010 brochure mailing they pulled 26,000 names from similar organizations on the Big List and supplemented them with their own internal database, which had grown to nearly 10,000 names by that point.

SFGC also created its first radio and television advertisements, buying \$10,000 worth of advertising on public television and radio in 2008–2009 and placing a \$5,000 media buy on the same channels in 2009–2010. The advertisements were designed to reinforce the rebranded marketing materials. The television advertisements used images of the Chorus (either stills or a performance clip) alongside practical information about how to purchase tickets to SFGC performances. The radio advertisements combined a soundtrack of the Chorus with information about the concert season and the same sort of practical ticket-buying information.

### **3. THIRD STEP: MEETING AUDIENCE EXPECTATIONS THROUGH VENUE CHOICE**

**T**o project a consistent and sustained brand image for the Chorus, Smith knew that the concert experience would need to match the tone and feel of the marketing materials. As

many contemporary brand consultants advise, Smith conducted her own “walk-through” of a concert to see the Chorus from the point of view of an audience member. She wanted to see whether the image of a high-quality performance was reinforced or undermined by the entire concert experience, from the outward appearance of the venue to the interactions with organization staff inside the concert hall.<sup>4</sup>

Smith supplemented the insights gleaned from this walk-through with the focus group findings that showed classical music patrons have expectations about where professional-level groups should perform and the atmosphere of the performance venues. Specifically, classical music patrons expect that:

- Groups will perform in locations that already have an established reputation as classical music venues
- Performances will include a box office, signage, and information about the performers
- Front-of-house staff will have a professional demeanor and appearance
- Lighting and audiovisual departments will provide professional onstage support when appropriate

These “professional” accoutrements are cues that foreshadow the likely quality of the performance itself. Smith already knew that audiences judged performing arts organizations by the venues in which they performed, but the focus group findings gave her specific information on which venues in the San Francisco Bay Area were considered acceptable to her target audience of classical music patrons. Since the rebranding began in 2008, SFGC has limited most of its home-season concerts to venues that communicate professionalism, including the Herbst Theatre, Davies Symphony Hall, the San Francisco Conservatory

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Shaun Smith and Joe Wheeler, *Managing the Customer Experience: Turning Customers into Advocates* (London: Financial Times Press, 2002), Chapter 3.

of Music, and area churches that are established as performance venues for classical music.

When other venues are used, SFGC completely transforms the front of the house to eliminate anything that the audience might perceive as unprofessional. For example, instead of using Chorus members as ushers, SFGC now relies on a volunteer staff of trained parents who adhere to a traditional black-and-white dress code. Lobby concessions have been eliminated in all venues with the exception of SFGC's own CDs.

SFGC has also upgraded the professionalism of its ticket sales operation by contracting with a local ticket sales company called City Box Office (CBO) that serves the nonprofit arts community in San Francisco. CBO not only provides a professional pre-concert experience by enabling telephone sales, but the organization also sets up a table with staff representatives in performance venue lobbies to extend the professional atmosphere right up to the performance itself.

#### **4. FOURTH STEP: REINFORCING PROGRAMMING AND ENHANCING PRESENTATION**

**F**or Music Director McMane, the focus group findings only reinforced her existing programming choices. Classical music patrons wanted substantial, challenging programming from artists with high-quality standards. McMane already had a predilection for commissioning new work, having SFGC perform foreign-language pieces, and selecting lengthy choral works.

But the focus group findings did cause McMane to change the way in which she *presented* the work to SFGC audiences. Now, she makes sure to emphasize when a work has multiple movements or involves a set of songs. As marketing professionals develop communications, McMane helps them capture the inter-

ests of classical music patrons by highlighting pieces that involve soloists or guest artists.

The perspectives of classical music patrons in the focus groups have also influenced how McMane arranges different components within a concert. She learned that classical music patrons expected to hear at least ten to twelve minutes of continuous music rather than a selection of shorter pieces. In order to counter stereotypes of inflexible or static chorus performances, McMane started giving soloists a chance to move forward and sing in front of the group during certain pieces.

The focus groups confirmed and underscored Smith and McMane's belief that SFGC performances should be anything but simplistic: "We heard loud and clear that classical music patrons wanted to hear compelling work, featuring collaboration with guest artists, a wider range of music, and cross-disciplinary partnerships," says Smith.

SFGC had a long history of featuring such collaborations and partnerships in its performances, but their importance to classical music patrons prompted Smith to improve the organization's ability to reach out and build stronger relationships with guest artists and collaborators. SFGC created a new staff position—assistant to the artistic director and production coordinator—responsible for building rapport with outside artists, strengthening communications with collaborating organizations, and identifying new performance venues suitable for presenting SFGC's world-class performances. SFGC soon realized that building these important relationships was a time-intensive process that merited expanding the position, originally conceived as a part-time role, into a full-time job.

## RESULTS

**S**FGC launched its new marketing approach two years ago, providing two seasons' worth of data by which to assess its impact. It is probably too soon to judge the full impact of the rebranding initiative, but SFGC has definitely achieved some success in changing the composition of its audience and attracting more classical music patrons.

But every repositioning has impacts for an organization. Rebranding efforts can cause tension internally and spark discontent among employees or board members who disagree with the desired repositioning. SFGC encountered a number of these challenges, even as Smith worked to minimize their impact.

### 1. NEW FACES IN THE AUDIENCE BUT ATTENDANCE HOLDS STEADY

**1. New faces appear in the audience.** SFGC began surveying its audience during the 2007–2008 season to provide a baseline audience profile before the launch of the rebranding campaign. The primary purpose of the surveys was to identify which audience members belonged to two mutually exclusive categories:

- *Friends and family* of Chorus singers
- *Classical music patrons* who were neither friends nor family of Chorus members *and* who responded affirmatively when asked if they had attended any other classical music performance in the past six months.

The survey also tracked attendance of *first-time visitors*

who had never attended an SFGC concert before. First-time visitors could overlap with the other two groups (e.g., an audience member could be both a classical music patron and a first-time visitor).

During the late spring 2008 concerts, SFGC conducted baseline surveys showing that classical music patrons made up 18% of the audience. A smaller subgroup—5% of the total audience—met the dual criteria of being both classical music patrons and first-time SFGC attendees. This second data point indicated that SFGC was not having much success before the rebranding at attracting new audiences of classical music patrons.

Following the launch of the rebranding campaign with new marketing materials in 2008, SFGC administered additional audience surveys during the fall and spring concerts of its 2008–2009 and 2009–2010 concert seasons.

The 2008–2009 concert survey data showed that classical music patrons made up more than a quarter of the audience (28%), a statistically significant increase from the pre-rebranding figure (Figure 4, Percentage of Classical Music Patrons in the Audience).<sup>5</sup> In addition, the number of first-time attendees who were classical music patrons nearly tripled, from 5% to 13%, also a statistically significant increase.<sup>6</sup>

The latest survey data, from the 2009–2010 season,

5. Only data from SFGC's season concerts are included; data from SFGC's annual holiday concert is not included. That concert has broader appeal and attracts an audience that differs from the fall and late spring concerts. The fall and late spring concerts are the core of SFGC's subscription series, and they are priced, marketed, and packaged as a group. The holiday concert is priced higher. That concert would therefore not be fully comparable to the baseline, which was taken at the 2007–2008 late spring concerts. It is interesting to note, however, that the holiday concert had an even greater number of classical music patrons than the fall and late spring concerts.

6. As detailed in the sidebar *Audience Survey Research to Measure Progress*, the baseline and test measures have different response rates. This makes the comparison between baseline and test somewhat uneven, although given the sufficient sample size and the size of the difference between baseline and test, it would be difficult to conclude that the test results are due to response rate differences.

## Audience Survey Research to Measure Progress

**A**s SFGC applied the results of its focus group research to reshape its marketing strategy, Smith looked for evidence that the organization was making progress toward its goal of attracting more classical music patrons. The obvious key indicator of success would be the presence of classical music patrons in the audience. SFGC decided that audience surveys would provide the best quantitative data for measuring attendance of classical music patrons.

SFGC had a low response rate for its first audience survey, around 9%. To improve audience-participation rates as it measured changes in audience composition, SFGC revised the design of the surveys to make them more appealing (that is, easier) to complete. It abandoned the original page-long survey and decided to limit the number of questions, hoping to obtain the following essential information from a larger number of audience members:

- Whether this was the audience member's first visit to an SFGC concert
- Whether the audience member had recently attended other classical music events
- Whether the audience member was a friend or relative of a chorister
- Whether the audience member had children under twelve at home (potentially useful information to help SFGC in a parallel effort to attract parents to its concerts)
- The age of the audience member

SFGC printed the surveys on four- by six-inch postcards (see Figure 3 and Colorplate 4, SFGC Audience Survey Postcard) that could be easily distributed by placing them in audience members' programs and collected. To ensure that the survey would not seem intimidating, SFGC used large fonts and a clear layout.

Extra house staff was assigned to encourage survey participation and assist with survey completion. To give audience members an incen-

tive to complete the survey, completed surveys were entered into a random prize drawing for an iPod.

The changes were effective; response rate quadrupled to more than 36%. Polly Springhorn, who oversaw the survey administration in her capacity as SFGC's director of development for institutional giving, believes that the prize drawing had a great impact on encouraging survey participation.

By requiring survey participants to provide an e-mail address or other contact information for prizewinner notification purposes, SFGC used the survey also to enhance its audience database at the same time as it captured quantitative data. Doing so, however, made the survey non-anonymous, limiting the kinds of questions that respondents might be willing to answer truthfully. Organizations looking to ask questions beyond simple demographics—such as performance ratings—might consider leaving the survey fully anonymous.

## Effective Response Rates

There is no rule of thumb about what constitutes a satisfactory response rate, but organizations should strive for at least the 25% to 30% response rates that are typical for surveys administered one time. Note that response rate is defined as the percentage of surveys completed out of those distributed. If surveys are not distributed to all audience members, then the response rate may actually be higher than the percentage of audience members who complete a survey. (For example, if 2,000 audience members attend a performance but only 1,000 surveys are distributed, and the organization receives 200 completed surveys, the response rate would be 20% even though the percentage of audience members who completed a survey is only 10%.) Organizations should strive to collect complete survey data from at least 100 respondents at each data-collection point to ensure a reasonable margin of error. Larger sample sizes produce more reliable data. *(continued)*

To increase response rates, organizations can:

- Distribute surveys prior to a performance by including the surveys in the concert programs or placing them on audience members' seats. They can ask volunteers or ushers to collect the surveys at intermission, or arrange collection boxes if staff time is limited.
- Post notices to encourage audience members to complete the survey, or make announcements pre-curtain or at intermission.
- Provide pens or small, inexpensive golf pencils in the lobby to ensure all audience members have access to a writing utensil, thereby eliminating one barrier to survey completion.
- Ensure that the question text is large enough for nearly all patrons to read. Surveys printed in an even larger font should be kept on hand for vision-impaired audience members, and distributed upon request.
- Ensure that staff or volunteers tasked with distributing the survey understand how the data will be used, and are prepared to answer questions in a concise and friendly way.

These measures should help bring response rates to between 30% and 40%. When possible, organizations should develop, test, and refine their research survey techniques and protocol before they begin to obtain baseline measurements. By laying that groundwork in advance, organizations will position themselves to get reliable data to inform decision making.

### Costs

Although SFGC kept much of the survey administration in-house, holding survey costs down, it sought outside assistance with survey development and printing (setup cost \$1,500), keypunching (an additional \$1,500 per year), tabulating, and reporting. Costs will, of course, vary by city and by organizational needs.

showed the percentage of first-time attendees who were classical music patrons holding fairly steady at 12%, while the overall percentage of classical music patrons in the audience dipped slightly to 23%. Taken together, the data from the past two years suggests that SFGC has had some success attracting a new audience of classical music patrons, but the organization did not retain that audience from year to year (that is, the number of repeat visitors has held steady, with a slight but not statistically significant downward dip, instead of showing gradual increases).

**2. Attendance holds steady.** While traditional classical music patrons are attending SFGC concerts in greater numbers

**Figure 3. SFGC Audience Survey Postcard**

Answer a few short questions and have the chance to win an iPod Nano\*

2008-2009  
San Francisco Girls Chorus

30 Years of Extraordinary Music

SUSAN MCMANE  
ARTISTIC DIRECTOR

Name \_\_\_\_\_  
Address \_\_\_\_\_  
e-mail \_\_\_\_\_ phone \_\_\_\_\_

\*contact information must be provided to notify you if you win.  
Please complete the back of this card

San Francisco Girls Chorus

Please answer a few short questions. The information you provide will help us obtain funding to continue our work. And, it will also qualify you to enter a drawing to win an iPod Nano.

1. Is this the first time you have attended a performance of the San Francisco Girls Chorus?  
 Yes  No

2. Have you attended any of the following types of performances in the past six months—opera, symphony orchestra, choral music, other classical music including chamber music, recitals etc.?  
 Yes  No

3a. Are there children under 12 in your household?  
 Yes  No

3b. [If you have children under 12] Are they with you here at this performance?  Yes  No

4. How did you learn about tonight's performance?  
 newspaper  radio  television  brochure/flier  
 by mail  Website  Word of mouth

5. Are you a friend or relative of someone in the chorus?  Yes  No

6. What is your age? \_\_\_\_\_ Sex:  Female  Male

Please complete the other side of this card.  
Thank you.

Front

Back

than before, overall attendance has been generally flat from the baseline period before the launch of the new marketing campaign to the most recent complete season (2009–2010).

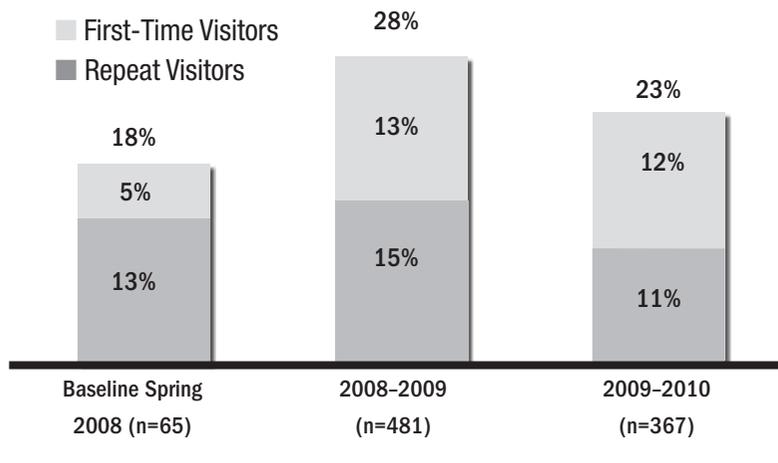
Table 1 presents attendance data from SFGC’s 2007–2008 (baseline), 2008–2009 and 2009–2010 seasons. SFGC typically presents six concerts per year—in addition to the two fall concerts and two late spring concerts that make up its season, it also presents a holiday concert, and a fundraising spring gala that includes dinner, a cocktail reception, and a live auction. SFGC members also appear regularly in concert with other groups such as the San Francisco Symphony or San Francisco Opera, but data from such appearances has not been included in this analysis since the audience at those concerts presumably attends primarily to see the opera or symphony.

As the table shows, attendance patterns are inconsistent from one concert type to another over the three-season time-

frame that includes a baseline measurement taken before the rebranding and the two seasons following the launch of the rebranding campaign. Attendance at the fall concerts and spring gala increased substantially over this period, but SFGC saw a drop in attendance at both its holiday concert and late spring concerts.

The drop in attendance at the spring concerts is somewhat of a mystery, although SFGC’s decision to present both 2010 spring concerts at the same location in San Francisco may have played a role. In prior years, SFGC would present one spring concert in San Francisco and one concert “over the bridge” in the East Bay. The venue SFGC typically uses in the East Bay did not have the technical capabilities needed for a piece newly commissioned for this concert, so both concerts were performed at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music. It is possible that some patrons who would have attended an East Bay concert simply found the San Francisco location inconvenient and therefore decided not to attend.

**Figure 4. Percentage of Classical Music Patrons in the Audience**



## 2. FAR-REACHING ORGANIZATIONAL IMPACT

**1. Impact on organizational decision making.** In the short term, the focus group findings led to new marketing materials, better performance venues, and enriched performances, but ultimately the decision to refocus SFGC’s identity on performance excellence led to much deeper changes in the fabric of the organization. As Smith says:

*This research was “life-changing” for me, for my staff, for the Chorus, and the whole organization. It not only informed marketing and branding and to some extent programming*

**Table 1. Attendance Trends at SFGC Concerts 2007–2010**

	2007–2008 Baseline Attendance (% capacity)	2008–2009 Attendance (% capacity)	2009–2010 Attendance (% capacity)
Fall Concerts	393 (37%)	565 (33%)	596 (52%)
Holiday Concert	2,934 (90%)	2,710 (89%)	2,689 (88%)
Spring Gala	453 (41%)	508 (55%)	615 (67%)
Late Spring Concerts	592 (85%)	582 (59%)	434 (62%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>4,372 (72%)</b>	<b>4,365 (66%)</b>	<b>4,334 (75%)</b>

**“WE DECIDED, ‘FIRST AND FOREMOST, SFGC IS A WORLD-CLASS PERFORMING ARTS ORGANIZATION,’ AND EVERY CHOICE YOU MAKE HAS TO BE FRAMED THROUGH THAT.”**

*choices, but also a whole new strategic plan for the board. We wrote a preamble [to the strategic plan] that said, “First and foremost, SFGC is a world-class performing arts organization,” and every choice you make has to be framed through that. Making that decision and carving it in marble changes the way I make every choice,*

*from whom we hire to be at the front desk, to the performance venues we choose or the marketing materials we create. Even the kind of finance director I hire will be different for a performing arts organization versus a private school or an after-school program.<sup>7</sup> Once we made our decision, we had some very specific fix-its. But the good news was that we could take action to address*

7. This alignment of processes, hiring, and administration is seen by many as a hallmark of strong brand management, and while not immediately visible to audience members, it is critical in building the kind of identity Smith hopes to create. See, e.g., Shaun Smith and Joe Wheeler, *Managing the Customer Experience: Turning Customers into Advocates* (London: Financial Times Press, 2002), 9.

*all of them.*

Smith saw that SFGC had an opportunity to clarify its most important strategic priorities. SFGC received an Organizational Effectiveness grant from the Hewlett Foundation to help cover the costs of implementing part of the organization’s new strategic plan, specifically as it related to clarifying board roles. This three- to five-year plan was adopted by the board in January of 2009. SFGC will revise the plan during FY11 to reflect progress and funding at that time, with the expectation of developing a revised strategic plan in FY12.

**2. Continued success of the education program.** The education program plays several critical roles at SFGC. The vocal teachers help the students to refine and polish their musical skills, which in turn provides the Chorus with the talent it needs to maintain its world-class standards. High enrollment in the Chorus School gives SFGC a deep pool of talent from which McMane can find a subset of girls with the skills and discipline required for SFGC performances. SFGC also depends on Chorus School tuition for a significant portion of its operating

revenue, which makes high enrollment an important piece of the organization's financial base. Despite the performance-focused rebranding, both enrollment and demand for places in the Chorus School have actually increased.

As part of an initiative to broaden SFGC's appeal among parents with daughters who could attend the school, SFGC conducted some additional focus group research in 2008 with parents of girls ages five to eight following the launch of the new marketing materials. The parents reacted to the marketing materials in ways that made it clear that they understood that SFGC had positioned itself as a world-class performing arts organization. The focus groups showed that parents seemed to relish the opportunity for their daughters to develop excellent musical skills while performing at various locations.

SFGC did learn, however, that a professional image could have its drawbacks. A substantial minority of parents, many of whom lived in the East Bay area, worried that the program might be too rigorous for their daughters. They saw images of SFGC performances in professional auditoriums and expressed concerns that such experiences would put too much pressure on the young performers. Some parents disliked the entire competitive nature of the auditions required for their daughters to enter the school.

Smith, McMane, and Elizabeth Avakian, director of the Chorus School, all believed that the existing curriculum did an excellent job advancing the school's goals of educating singers in professional-level chorus techniques. Consequently, SFGC did not make any changes to its curriculum based on the results of the focus group research with parents. But SFGC's leaders did take steps to adjust their recruitment strategies in ways that would take into

account the doubts expressed by some parents. New recruitment materials, particularly those used to generate East Bay campus enrollment, emphasized the social and developmental aspects of the school that existed alongside the rigorous musical training.

Since all parents in the focus groups wanted to make sure their daughters enjoyed their time at the school, the research reminded staff at all levels of SFGC to highlight the convivial aspects of the school in conversations with families considering enrollment. As a concession to parental sensitivities, SFGC de-emphasized the word "audition" whenever possible in its communications in favor of the more informal label "tryout," which has connotations of the tryouts that schools use for various sports teams and extra-curricular activities.

While SFGC could have experimented with a more light-hearted approach to education or even attempted to create a separate level of the school devoted primarily to fun, Smith concluded that both of those options would have distracted from the organization's primary mission to provide high-quality choral performances, undermined the Chorus School's capacity to provide the talent needed for those performances, and sent a mixed message about SFGC's identity. Smith had seen the organization's mission suffer from a lack of clarity in the past, and she was determined to prevent such mission confusion on her watch.

McMane strongly supported the idea of keeping SFGC's educational philosophy focused on developing professional-level performance skills. "Our focus has always been on delivering outstanding musical performances," she says. "We can only get there if we have wonderful training practices in place."

While a minority of parents may have found SFGC's professional image off-putting, it has not hampered Chorus School enrollment. In fact, enrollment has grown dramatically, with enrollment in SFGC training programs increasing 26% over the past two years (with this increase likely due in part to the publicity surrounding the Chorus's performance at President Obama's inauguration ceremony and its move into the new educational facility). Enrollment stood at 257 in October 2007. One year later, enrollment had grown to approximately 275 pupils, not including those students enrolled in a new preparatory chorus program for girls ages five to seven. By 2009, enrollment had increased once more and stood at approximately 325 students.

**3. Impact on the board of directors.** At SFGC, some parents and board members believed that the school and the Chorus should serve primarily to empower the female students and performers. By contrast, Smith and other stakeholders felt it was critical to clarify that musical excellence was the organization's primary objective, with personal empowerment emerging from that. As SFGC labeled empowerment as an important but secondary objective, some stakeholders inevitably felt slighted. "You cannot be all things to all people," says Smith. "We are not big enough or rich enough to pursue all of our potential aspirations."

SFGC's sharper focus on performances came at a time when a variety of other forces were already affecting the board. SFGC had just completed a difficult capital campaign that left many board members feeling that they had helped usher in a grand milestone and that their work was done, or they were simply burned out. In addition, the economic recession led to employment changes that made it difficult for some board members to continue their responsibilities.

This confluence of forces, along with the refocus on professional identity and how that would impact board responsibilities, ultimately led to the departure of many of the twenty-two board members, leaving just ten remaining. Painful as the resignations were, Smith feels that SFGC has benefited from the consensus and unified sense of purpose among the board members who remain.

As the organization evolves, Smith is moving the board to govern more like boards of mature cultural organizations do. Before Smith arrived in 2006, SFGC's board resembled the boards of countless community-based fledgling arts organizations around the country. Many board members had direct involvement with the organization, for instance, as parents of students or chorus alumnae. In fact, SFGC's bylaws specified that the board had to include a certain percentage of parents and alumnae. Members of the SFGC board had grown accustomed to giving their opinions on marketing decisions, suggesting programming choices, and even getting involved in day-to-day staff responsibilities.

Smith wanted the board to concentrate more on the types of fund-raising, oversight, and strategic roles typically played by the boards of established cultural organizations. "The board should not be discussing whether or not there are beets in the salad at the annual fund-raising event—a conversation that we actually had at one [pre-rebranding] board meeting," says Smith. "Now the board can focus its attention on who they can invite to the event and how they can spread the word about the Chorus to members of the community who might not already be familiar with the work of the Girls Chorus."

The new direction of the organization required more objectivity and pragmatism from board members, something

particularly hard for those board members who were also parents of Chorus members and Chorus School students. Many board members who had signed on to help with day-to-day operational issues ultimately left as Smith shifted the board's focus toward broader strategic challenges. The slimmer SFGC board subsequently scrapped some of its standing committees and replaced them with ad hoc committees that convened as needed for important initiatives. This enabled the board to focus the bulk of its time and energy on broader purposes such as designing and implementing a strategic plan.

In 2009, the smaller board agreed to amend SFGC's bylaws, thereby eliminating the requirement that a minimum number of board members be parents or alumnae.<sup>8</sup> The amendment is not meant to discourage parents or alumnae from participating on the board—in fact the current board president is the parent of an alumna—but it does give Smith more flexibility in developing the best possible board without regard to any board member's personal connection to the organization's programs.

The reduction in the size of the board does not seem to have had any financial impact on SFGC. A review of board giving revealed that the cumulative annual contributions of the remaining ten board members nearly equal the total amount collected from the previous board of twenty-two. It turned out that many of those who resigned had not been following the suggestion in the board agreement for a minimum donation of \$3,500 per year.

Nonetheless, Smith recognizes that a board of ten generally has a lower fund-raising capacity than a board with fifteen or twenty members. Recruitment for the new board has

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8. The larger, pre-resignation board had rejected this idea two years earlier.

been a slow process, particularly because the organization is looking for a particular kind of board member who may, like classical music patrons in the focus groups, have hesitations about SFGC. "I think we are still challenged by a bit of an identity crisis," says Smith. "While the external perception of the Chorus is changing, I fear we still send some mixed messages, especially to the local arts community, which is where we really need to recruit from, in my opinion, to take us firmly to the next level of recognition as a mature performing arts organization."

While Smith works to expand the size of the board and revise the criteria for board membership, she is also developing volunteer positions to capitalize on the energy and enthusiasm of parents and alumnae who wish to contribute to the success of SFGC, but who do not have the wherewithal to contribute financially at the board level. These volunteers organize small-scale fund-raisers and perform other functions. Although most choral groups rely on volunteers, Smith is wary of building a volunteer pool of parents, because that would be more characteristic of a "Brownie troop" than a performing arts organization. Instead, she says, "we are thinking about the roles needed in a performing arts organization." SFGC has also built programming for alumnae that keeps them connected, such as panel discussions hosted and led by older alumnae, in addition to the alumnae chorus (formed in 2007) that has two scheduled performances per year.

**4. Professional reputation flourishes.** As 2010 came to a close, SFGC continued to receive wide recognition in its field, including two 2010 Grammy Awards for the organization's collaborations with the San Francisco Symphony. In 2011, SFGC co-hosted the annual national conference of Chorus America in

San Francisco, which Smith sees as continued recognition of the organization's maturity.

The chorus is also achieving new visibility in terms of its international reputation. As an example, an open part-time faculty position at the school attracted more than forty applications from around the world. In the past, similar openings have typically attracted no more than eight or ten applicants.

On a more local level, SFGC appeared as featured guest for the San Francisco Symphony's performance of Mendelssohn's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* during the Symphony's 2010–2011 season. Such artistic successes suggest that SFGC has continued to maintain its superior artistic standards even while undergoing widespread organizational changes.

## **EVALUATIVE ANALYSIS: EARLY SIGNS OF SUCCESS, BUT CHALLENGES REMAIN**

**A**t the beginning of SFGC's third year of its large-scale rebranding and strategic repositioning initiative, results were mixed. Total concert attendance has been essentially flat since the rebranding began, but SFGC's data shows encouraging signs that the organization has started to attract its target audience of classical music patrons in greater numbers.

SFGC is aware that it would be unrealistic to expect overnight success or even success after just a few seasons. Key priorities for the organization moving forward include understanding how to keep classical music audiences coming back and strengthening the board, all as it continues its emphasis on achieving the highest levels of excellence in producing and presenting music for treble voices and providing superior vocal training.

SFGC is concerned by the survey data showing that many classical music patrons have not been coming back for repeat visits during the second year of the rebranding efforts. Unfortunately, it is not unusual for arts organizations to struggle to bring first-time visitors back and transform them into repeat visitors. A study called the Audience Growth Initiative found that just one in ten first-time classical music ticket buyers

returns for a second visit.<sup>9</sup>

It may be the case that the content of SFGC's performances did not meet the expectations of classical music patrons that had been raised by the marketing materials. Smith believes SFGC has done a "pretty good" job in getting new people, but still sees room for improvement. "At the end of the day you have to deliver on the promise of the brand, and we've done that, but I'm not sure that when people come we always deliver on the promise of the brand in terms of program and venue choices; sometimes there is a bit of disconnect between branding efforts and reality with what get puts onstage," she says. Budgeting issues may be making that difficult. "We have to save money right now," Smith adds. "We try to create the impression of something as artistically relevant as possible."

Alternatively, perhaps the classical music patrons made their ticket purchases based on the content of specific concert programs and could return at some point if SFGC chooses particular pieces that appeal to them. The Audience Growth Initiative study suggests that multiple elements of the experience beyond artistic quality—from repertoire to parking to conductor comments—play a role in determining whether first-time visitors return for additional performances.<sup>10</sup>

SFGC is working to understand why classical music patron audiences are not returning in greater numbers. Having focused on demographic data collection with its audience surveys over the past few years (to understand audience composition), SFGC is now seeking to determine audience motivations for concert attendance. To that end, future audience surveys will focus less

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9. Oliver Wyman, "Turning First-Timers into Life-Timers: Addressing the True Drivers of Churn," [http://www.oliverwyman.com/ow/pdf\\_files/OW\\_EN\\_PUBL\\_2008\\_AUDIENCEGROWTHINITIATIVE.pdf](http://www.oliverwyman.com/ow/pdf_files/OW_EN_PUBL_2008_AUDIENCEGROWTHINITIATIVE.pdf), 7.

10. Oliver Wyman, 12.

on demographics and more on psychographics. Patience will be an important strategic asset for SFGC throughout this process.

Smith and her team recognize that cultivating an audience with the high expectations of classical music patrons could take a number of years. They understand that they cannot yet declare victory with regard to their goals of building awareness of the San Francisco Girls Chorus and making sure that classical music audiences have a better understanding and appreciation of girls choruses. "We still face these issues," says Smith. "It is an ongoing process. We've come a long way, but there's always room to go. These issues are still with us, and may always be to some extent."

SFGC has diversified its audience by attracting classical music patrons, but the flat attendance levels overall lead to the conclusion that fewer friends and family members are attending SFGC concerts. There are mitigating factors that suggest the drop in attendance by friends and family may be a temporary phenomenon. So far, SFGC is basing its analysis on just two seasons' worth of data compiled during a challenging economic environment, and with a change in venue during the last season that may have discouraged some East Bay friends and families from attending the late spring concert.

On the other hand, Chorus America's *2010 Chorus Operations Survey Report*<sup>11</sup> shows that median audiences in 2008–2009 were in the range of those of prior years, suggesting that the economy may not be the key factor. SFGC is watching attendance trends closely with the understanding that continued support and attendance by friends and family are critical to SFGC's well-being.

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11. Kushner, Roland J., *2010 Chorus Operations Survey Report* (Washington, D.C.: Chorus America, 2010), p. 8.

For the foreseeable future, SFGC will also need to cope with the limitations of having a smaller board while it works to rebuild board membership. SFGC leaders like Smith see this challenge as an opportunity to implement long-term changes by reforming the functions of the board and rethinking ways that the board can advance the organization's core goal of raising its cultural and artistic profile in San Francisco.

## KEY RESULTS DRIVERS

To the extent that SFGC has achieved its goals of improving community perceptions of the Chorus and attracting classical music patrons, four factors have played major roles:

### 1. PINPOINTING PERCEPTUAL BARRIERS

In trying to attract new audiences who may not be inclined to participate in a particular art form or with a particular organization, one comprehensive framework suggests that the key lies in overcoming perceptual barriers, either in the form of negative perceptions that an audience has about a particular art form or organization, or the absence of positive perceptions or reasons for attending.<sup>12</sup>

The research revealed that classical music patrons had little interest in attending SFGC concerts because of their low awareness of the artistic significance of girls choruses. The focus group findings also showed that classical music fans assumed that SFGC performances would lack the quality, variety, and dynamic presentation that they typically sought in classical music concerts. The research told SFGC that classical music patrons wanted information on the caliber of the performance, the content of

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12. Kevin P. McCarthy and Kimberly Jinnett, *A New Framework for Building Participation in the Arts* (Santa Monica, Calif: RAND Corp., 2001), <http://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/audience-development-for-the-arts/key-research/Documents/New-Framework-for-Building-Participation-in-the-Arts.pdf>, 32.

the program, the location, and the visual presentation before making a decision on whether to attend a concert.

The research also showed SFGC that it might be inadvertently reinforcing assumptions of amateurishness with its existing communications, venue choices, and other cues. By telling SFGC what the organization would need to communicate in order to appeal to classical music patrons, the research gave SFGC data that it could use to professionalize its box office, venue choices, and even performance presentation.

## 2. USING AUDIENCE RESEARCH AS A DECISION-MAKING TOOL

**S**FGC's rebranding has been guided from the start by research. Everyone in the organization had his or her own ideas about why classical music patrons were not attending in larger numbers. To act decisively and with certainty, Smith wanted to move beyond assumptions and gain an evidence-based understanding of the perceptions she needed to change.

Smith began with a definite goal for the research—she wanted to understand why classical music patrons were not attending SFGC performances in larger numbers. Smith wanted to discover whether SFGC suffered from an awareness problem or a brand image problem, and if the perceptual barriers were located within the organization (SFGC) or in the art form (girls choruses). She had fully articulated hypotheses to test, as opposed to just asking respondents what they thought about the Chorus.

From the start, she also had definite ideas about what she wanted to impact (perceptions) and how SFGC might do that (e.g., through communications, venue choice, and other concert elements). The clarity of those ideas informed the structure and content of the research. The result of giving so much attention at

the outset to how the research findings would be put into action was that the research delivered a plethora of specific information SFGC could act on.

The research was qualitative, but it gave the organization a strong enough idea of the mind-set of the audience it was looking for, and something concrete to respond to, as opposed to nonspecific assumptions about what might be deterring classical music patrons from attending SFGC concerts. “The research was the catalyst that got everybody to look differently at things,” said Smith. She shared the research results with all SFGC staff and presented the results to the full board of directors. While SFGC staff and board members were not pleased to hear negative perceptions about their art form and their organization, many were spurred to action by the focus group findings.

Although the research was one of the most expensive components of SFGC's rebranding campaign,<sup>13</sup> Smith believes that the focus groups played a vital role in helping to guide all of SFGC's subsequent actions and decisions. “Having professional focus groups inform us how we were perceived by inclined arts participants in this community gave us a factual, rather than speculative, platform for action, as well as specific ideas on improving our image and adjusting our programming in the arts market,” says Smith. “Most of the steps we took, and costs we incurred, were directly related to what we learned from that research. The focus group research influenced the branding and imaging in our new marketing materials, our venue choices, the guest artists, our new music, and even helped us recognize the need to dedicate a staff person to coordinate artistic and production needs in support of the artistic director.”

13. Focus group research typically costs from \$6,000 to \$8,000 for a group of six to eight respondents. These costs cover recruiting, respondent incentives, facility rental, professional moderating, and report writing, and vary depending on the target audience and the city in which the research is conducted.

As SFGC has moved deeper into the rebranding process and continued its efforts to attract classical music patrons, the organization used an elegant and simple audience survey to collect the metrics it needs to track its success in attracting classical music patrons. In the process, it has uncovered the challenge of retaining those audiences and transforming them into regular concert attendees. SFGC is now adjusting the structure of its audience survey to capture psychographic data that will be used to understand motivations for concert attendance in order to help build on its early successes and deepen its relationship with its target audience of classical music patrons.

### 3. BEING CLEAR ABOUT THE MISSION

SFGC was founded as a world-class performing arts organization supported by a rigorous music education program. As both an education and performance organization, SFGC has not always been clear internally or externally about which objective is most important. Over time, the balance of the organization's attention shifted toward the school, in effect giving SFGC a de facto mission that ran contrary to its stated mission.

This ambiguity can create confusion and weaken the brand. Smith, McMane, and Avakian succeeded in refocusing SFGC back toward its original mission as a performing arts organization, building on the organization's existing training program and strong performance skills to deliver professional world-class musical performances.

This declaration that the primary emphasis should be on world-class performances caused some discontent among those board members who had come to believe that SFGC should prioritize education and student development. However, after an initial period of adjustment, the redefinition ultimately helped

create a sense of unity and aligned the members of the organization toward a common goal. It has also produced an organization that gives explicit signals to those in the community about the organization's mission and goals. Given that the education element of SFGC is closely linked with the concept of delivering professional-caliber performances, it is not surprising that enrollment has risen since the redefinition took place.

### 4. PRIORITIZING TRANSPARENCY AND COLLABORATION ACROSS THE ORGANIZATION

Smith had lofty objectives for rebranding SFGC, but she could easily have come up against internal resistance from those who found the prospect of change unsettling or who did not fully understand her strategy or its rationale. Not everyone was on board right away. With a leadership style that emphasized transparency, Smith built alliances by involving key artistic and education staff throughout the process. Ultimately Smith found that many other staff members shared her vision of SFGC as a world-class performing arts organization and had been looking for a leader who could mobilize them in support of that goal.

Audience research on perceptions of an organization can be especially threatening, because staff may feel that they and their work are being evaluated, or that their decisions will be questioned. The fact that this research was being led by a newcomer (Smith) could have heightened those feelings. Smith made sure from the start that everyone knew that the focus group research was not an evaluation of SFGC. Moreover, she emphasized that the research would be used as a tool to *inform* artistic programming decisions rather than a cudgel to *dictate* programming. Smith's management style emphasized collaboration, not compliance. By explicitly stating these objectives up front, she less-

ened the possibility of any distrust or fear between the marketing and artistic departments, enabling both to work together closely and collaboratively toward a common goal.

To further increase collaboration and transparency, artistic staff and education staff were included in the research development process. They knew that the focus group participants would be members of their target audience. They understood the objectives and were invited to observe the focus groups firsthand. While appreciative of the opportunity, ultimately the artistic staff decided not to attend the focus group sessions. “It’s an emotional thing,” says McMane, who sensed that the focus groups would reveal that members of the target audience held misperceptions about the quality and professionalism of girls choruses. “I would want to rush into the room and make them understand that they are wrong.” While she declined to attend the focus groups, McMane did take the time to read the reports and understand the implications for what she needed to communicate in order to win over classical music patrons.

In presenting the focus group findings to McMane and other staff, Horton and Smith took steps to defuse any potential defensiveness that might arise when reading negative misperceptions of the Chorus. They reminded the staff that the focus group members had no direct experience with the Chorus and that any negative value judgments were therefore based not on reality, but on perceptions. They reminded everyone that SFGC needed to understand these misperceptions in order to correct them. “It is important to understand that staff may have fears and insecurities about how the research will be used,” says Horton. “Leaders should therefore be in constant contact with staff to reassure them and explain the logic behind any strategic decisions made using focus group findings.”

## **BUILDING AND SUSTAINING MOMENTUM**

**A**s SFGC moves forward, Smith is looking to build on the progress to date. SFGC aspires to have a high artistic and cultural profile, but there are significant financial costs associated with such goals. Some of the costs involved in launching SFGC’s rebranding campaign—such as outlays for market research and consulting or upgrading the print materials—are not ongoing. The challenge in the long term is delivering on the brand over time.

SFGC believes it will need to continue to fund several critical areas to build momentum. First and foremost are programming-related costs (\$25,000 to \$30,000 per year) of engaging guest artists and commissioning new works. These have been a part of SFGC since its beginning and are non-negotiable. As Smith says, “We aspire to be a world-class arts organization. This is the one area where we can’t afford to backslide for any reason—even in trying to save money. Programming and artistic collaborations must continue to be engaging and robust for us to recruit and, more important, retain our audiences.”

SFGC will also need to find financial resources to support the annual marketing costs of creating and mailing its season brochures. In an effort to improve the sustainability of its marketing efforts, SFGC has taken steps to reduce expenses and improve the efficiency of its marketing campaigns. For example, SFGC obtained templates for program books and e-mail blasts

from the designer who rebranded SFGC's marketing materials. While SFGC still outsources the design of its seasonal brochure, these templates enable the organization to produce its program books and e-mail blasts in-house by simply placing new text and images into the existing templates.

In addition, SFGC has begun promoting individual concerts exclusively through e-mail, as opposed to sending out concert-specific direct-mail campaigns. This shift to an exclusive online channel allows SFGC to save on printing and mailing costs. SFGC has also begun to build its own e-mail database from names collected through its audience surveys, and SFGC marketing staff have reached out to neighboring arts organizations and procured names for one-time use each season. SFGC has not seen declines in concert attendance following the discontinuation of its printed direct-mail campaigns, and believes that the e-mail blasts may even be more effective than direct mail at generating ticket sales for individual concerts.

SFGC has also removed some elements entirely from the marketing mix. Television and radio promotions have been eliminated for the 2009–2010 and 2010–2011 seasons, although Smith hopes in the future to return to those outlets, as well as to printed mailings for specific concerts, if her budget allows.

## GOING FORWARD

**R**ebranding can be a powerful tool for attracting a new audience, but it can take time for an organization to change perceptions or build awareness. The best way any organization can accelerate acceptance of its rebranding campaign is by consistently delivering experiences that fulfill its brand promises. For SFGC, this means producing high-quality, professional-caliber concerts that consistently meet the expectations of its target audience of classical music patrons.

An audience built on the friends and families of Chorus members is necessarily limited in size. As individual singers leave the Chorus, their friends and family are unlikely to be loyal audience members. In contrast, if SFGC manages to turn its new classical music patrons into repeat visitors, it should be able to grow this portion of its audience over time, since they will be loyal to the Chorus as an institution rather than to individual members of the group. SFGC hopes that this growing audience of classical music lovers will eventually produce substantial ticket revenue.

If SFGC manages to achieve greater appreciation and respect among local San Francisco arts patrons, Smith believes the organization is likely to strengthen its ability to raise funds and broaden the base of its financial support beyond ticket sales and school tuition.

At the moment, however, many uncertainties persist: The board is still in the midst of trying to attract new members. Ticket sales have been flat, and SFGC may not see considerable

momentum in the short term. SFGC hopes to continue to stimulate enthusiasm and interest among classical music patrons, and believes that doing so will require additional funds to continue to commission new works and support guest artists, as well as to support continued marketing to this audience. SFGC is therefore likely to require additional sources of funding from grants for multiple seasons to come to support marketing and programming costs, and the organization is currently working to secure that funding.

Any organization contemplating a rebranding initiative should consider the length of the timeline between the initial outlay of funds and eventual returns on investment. Smith herself clearly recognizes the financial challenges ahead, as can be seen from her decision to organize an upcoming board retreat around the theme of “Strategic Planning in a Post-Wallace Era.”

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

**T**here are many arts organizations that wish to heighten their artistic and cultural relevance, some of whom may be producing or presenting an art form that is not well understood. If your organization is contemplating this leap, here are some questions to guide your thought process and stimulate discussion:

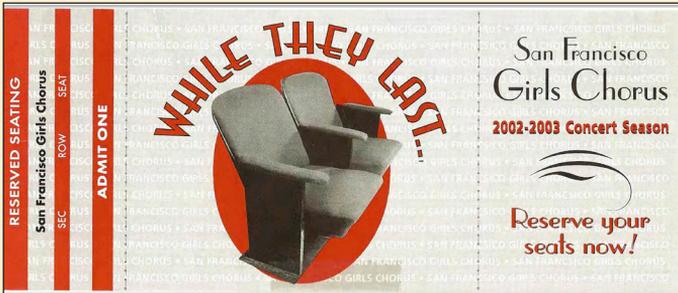
- Do you have the timeline, patience, and resources required to undergo a transformational process that could span several years?
- How large is the audience in your community for the art that you are producing or presenting? What *specific perceptions* does that audience hold about your organization and its art?
- What do you need to know and what research do you need to conduct to attract new audiences and convert them to repeat visitors?
- Beyond revising your marketing and communications, what other changes (venue, staffing, recruiting, etc.) would your organization need to make as part of a rebranding initiative?
- Can the different elements of your organization—including administration, artistic, marketing, and the board—support and enable your rebranding and reprioritization if necessary? How can an atmosphere of transparency and collaboration be created to facilitate the rebranding effort?

## ABOUT THE LEAD AUTHOR

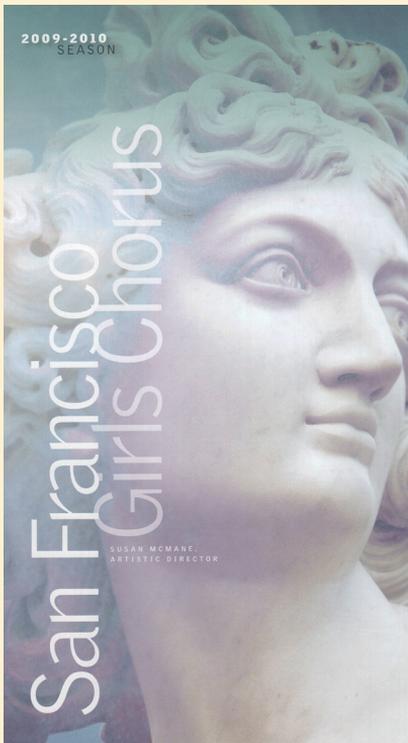
**B**ob Harlow, PhD, develops custom research programs that help organizations identify how their brands, offerings, and messages intersect with what matters most to their target audiences. He has held senior and management positions at IBM and at market research consulting groups such as Yankelovich Partners, RONIN, and KRC, and currently leads Bob Harlow Research and Consulting, LLC, a market research consulting organization. He has partnered with marketing managers and senior executives at some of the world's largest companies and leading nonprofit organizations to build brands, target offerings, and design effective communications supporting them.

Bob has written hundreds of surveys and conducted hundreds of focus groups and interviews with broad audiences in thirty countries. He has more than a dozen scholarly publications in social psychology and research methods. He has a PhD from Princeton University in social psychology and completed the postdoctoral program in quantitative analysis at New York University's Stern School of Business and Graduate School of Arts and Science. He speaks English, Spanish, French, and Portuguese.

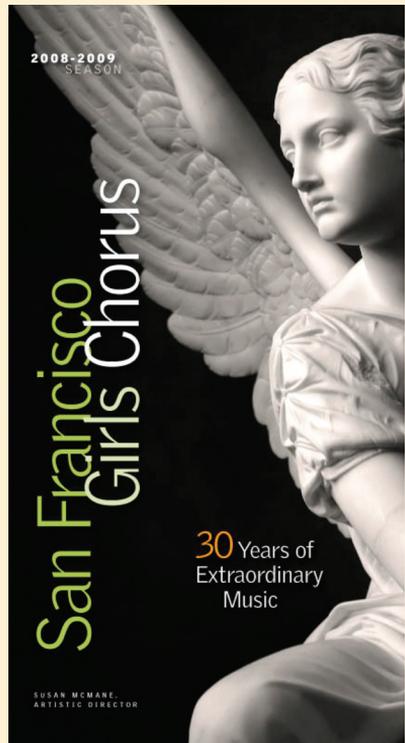
## Colorplate 1. Pre- and Post-Rebranding Season Brochures



Before (2002-2003)

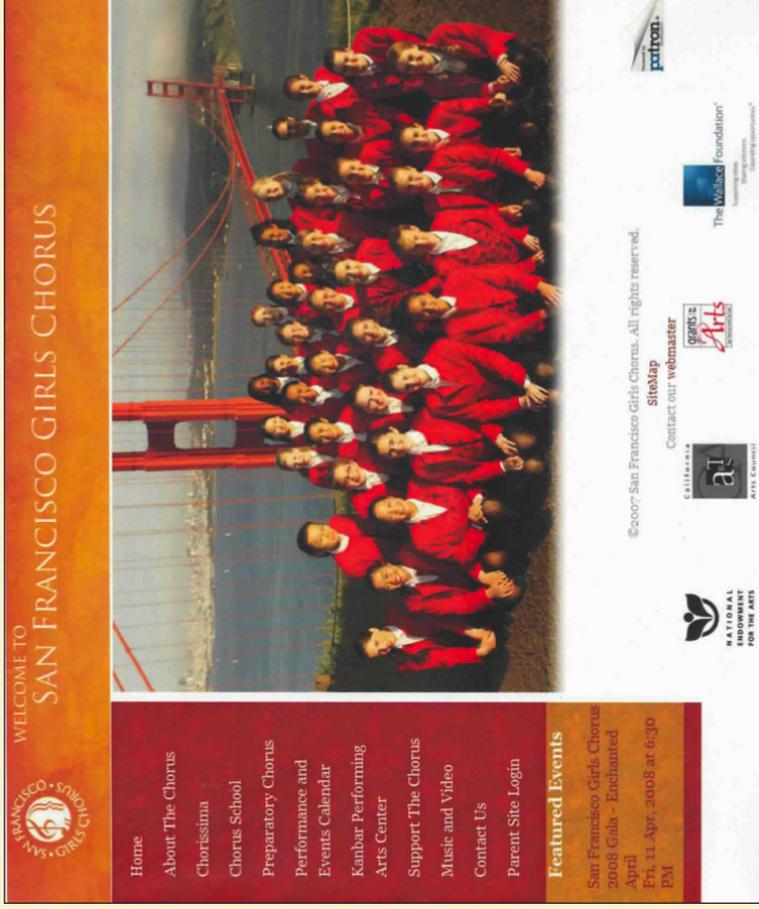


After (2008-2009)

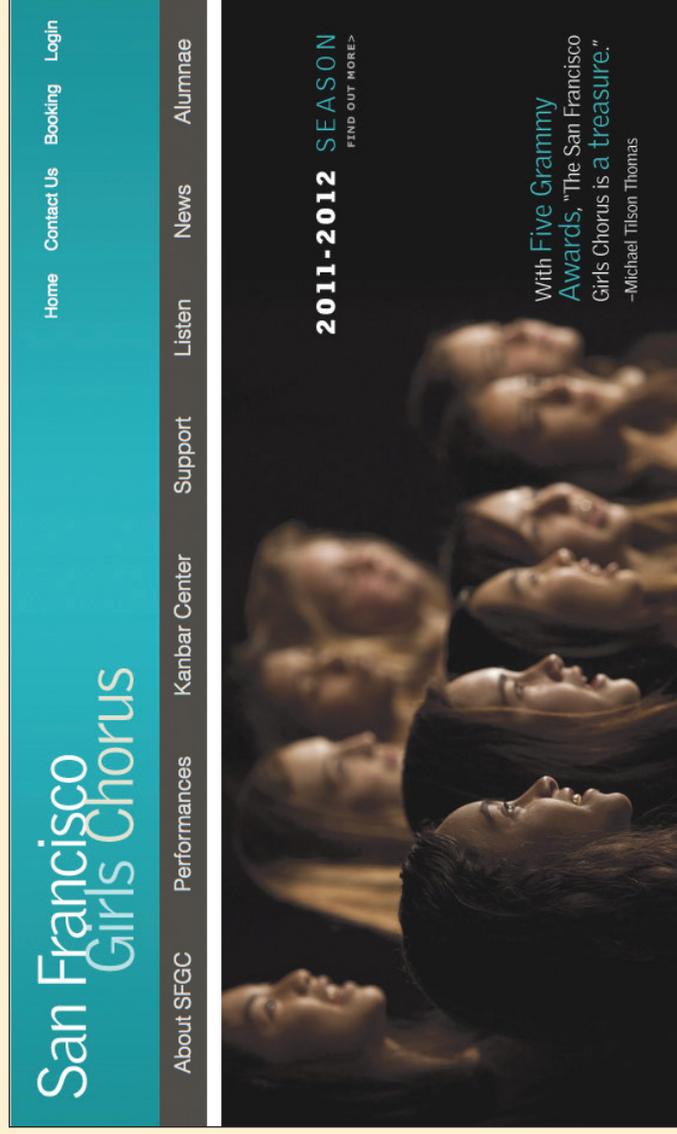


After (2009-2010)

**Colorplate 2. Pre- Rebranding Website Home Page**



**Colorplate 3. Post- Rebranding Website Home Page**



## Colorplate 4. SFGC Audience Survey Postcard

2008-2009  
SEASON

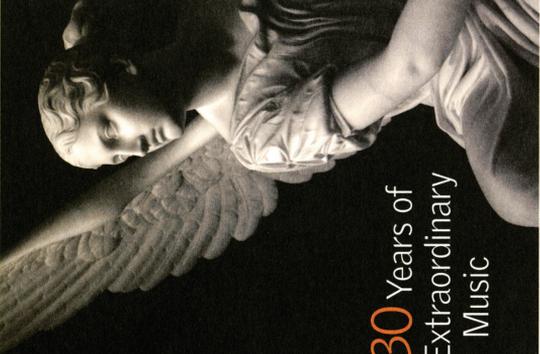
San Francisco  
Girls Chorus

30 Years of  
Extraordinary  
Music

SUSAN MCMANE,  
ARTISTIC DIRECTOR

Name \_\_\_\_\_  
Address \_\_\_\_\_  
e-mail \_\_\_\_\_ phone \_\_\_\_\_

\*contact information must be provided to notify you if you win.  
**Please complete the back of this card**



# San Francisco Girls Chorus

Please answer a few short questions. The information you provide will help us obtain funding to continue our work. And, it will also qualify you to enter a drawing to win an iPod Nano.

1. Is this the first time you have attended a performance of the San Francisco Girls Chorus?  
 Yes  No
2. Have you attended any of the following types of performances in the past six months—opera, symphony orchestra, choral music, other classical music including chamber music, recitals etc.?  
 Yes  No
- 3a. Are there children under 12 in your household?  
 Yes  No
- 3b. [If you have children under 12] Are they with you here at this performance?  Yes  No
4. How did you learn about tonight's performance?  
 Newspaper  Radio  Television  Brochure/flier  
 By mail  Website  Word of mouth
5. Are you a friend or relative of someone in the chorus?  
 Yes  No
6. What is your age? \_\_\_\_\_ Sex:  Female  Male

**Please complete the other side of this card.**  
Thank you.

Front

Back



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*How Boston Lyric Opera Sought to Create Greater Opportunities for Families to Attend Opera*

**More Than Just a Party:**  
*How the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum Boosted Participation by Young Adults*

**Attracting an Elusive Audience:**  
*How the San Francisco Girls Chorus Is Breaking Down Stereotypes and Generating Interest Among Classical Music Patrons*

**Building Deeper Relationships:**  
*How Steppenwolf Theatre Company Is Turning Single-Ticket Buyers into Repeat Visitors*

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