
Background

The Wallace Excellence Awards were designed to support cultural institutions' audience- and participation-building strategies

EMP Museum On the Boards Teatro Zinzanni
Pacific Northwest Ballet Seattle Art Museum SIFF
Seattle Opera Seattle Repertory Theatre Seattle Youth
Symphony Orchestra

This report synthesizes the **audience engagement insights and takeaways** from audience research & evaluation studies conducted by each of the grantees

Insights on...

The cultural experience

Meaningful cultural experiences deliver on both intellectual and emotional levels

People feel they need a baseline level of knowledge *before* they can engage with the arts meaningfully...

...But arts organizations hope that attendance and participation will help audiences *gain* that knowledge

Insights on...

Decision-making

Price sensitivity is a barrier to attendance—but it's the **perceived value** of an experience that matters (not cost alone)

Loyalty and commitment will only come once audiences feel they know and trust the arts experience/organization

The traditional subscription model continues to decline in relevance... especially for new arts audiences

Insights on...

Engagement & Affiliation

Deep engagement isn't a switch to flip, nor is it a given among cultural audiences

Fresh experiences and **personal connections** help facilitate the trajectory from casual attendance to true affiliation

Even long-standing patrons are eager for new experiences

Audience databases/records capture only a portion of arts audiences—and only a fraction of their behaviors

Insights on...

Communications & Outreach

Word-of-mouth is far more powerful than traditional media

Social media is a powerful tool in its own right—
but serves a distinct purpose

Insights on...

Technology

Technology is the means to an end—not the end itself

Online audiences are generally already affiliated with the organization in offline forms

Insights on...

New audiences

Audiences new to a cultural institution—or artistic discipline—can be self-conscious about their newness

Unfamiliar cultural experiences can feel more like work than fun for new audiences

Insights on...

Young adult audiences

They look for social and interactive experiences, but want those elements to be integrated into the art (not separate from it)

They're sensitive to practical barriers: price, schedule, and feeling "locked" into a decision

They're savvy marketing consumers, attuned to communications that are "trying too hard" to target them

Insights on...

Teen audiences

Teens **don't** want to be treated like kids... but they **do** want to feel welcomed and included in an experience

The liaisons interacting with and facilitating teens' cultural experiences play a very important role

Parental support for teen involvement in cultural programs is critical to the success of the engagement effort

Insights on...

Family audiences

Families' cultural decision-making dynamics are complex, as parents must balance the needs of multiple age ranges

And parents look to give more decision-making autonomy (and authority) to their children as they get older

Insights on...

Culturally-specific audiences

Culturally-specific audiences want to connect with their own heritage and community—but not only to their own heritage and community

10 audience engagement takeaways

1. Build audience engagement strategies and new formats as legitimate cultural experiences in their own right
2. Humanize the institution, the art, and the artists
3. Provide tools to help audiences share cultural experiences with others

10 audience engagement takeaways

4. Offer a variety of experience types—from “receptive” to “active”—to enable patrons to self-select based on their preferences and needs
5. Allow patrons to tailor the amount and type of content with which they interact
6. Programs or activities that are social in nature should also be art- and/or content-focused

10 audience engagement takeaways

7. Bring audiences behind-the-scenes to make the artistic process more accessible, familiar, and relatable
8. Go beyond opening your doors to newcomers —actively invite them and then welcome, orient, and listen to them

10 audience engagement takeaways

9. Be wary of over-discounting; emphasize the value and benefits of the experience to make the cost “worth it”
10. Don't rely solely on programs and benefits that make attendance more convenient; such strategies only remove barriers without providing an active reason to participate

What does this mean for you?

The questions that follow don't have a "right answer" – and nor can they be answered by audiences alone

You need to wrestle with the possibilities and implications and decide the "right answer" for yourself

Think of approaches that...

- Don't require *audiences* to change
- Don't require *the environment* to change
- Don't require *funding* that you can't secure

What can you do, today, to engage audiences?

What does this mean for you?

How can audience development efforts balance the need to both mitigate attendance barriers AND give audiences a compelling reason to participate?

How can organizations help “non-traditional” formats and experiences become more central to their programmatic identities?

How can you make your audiences feel welcomed and valued at every touchpoint?

What does this mean for you?

How do organizations convey that audiences don't need to meet a threshold of prior knowledge to have a meaningful experience?

*How can you make your audiences “miss” you?
How can you make your audiences think of you as absolutely essential to their lives?*

What is the role of marketing when word-of-mouth is dominant?

Acknowledgments

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The sponsors

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The Wallace Excellence Awards cohort

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