

CONNECTING WITH AUDIENCES: BUILDING AND MAINTAINING RELATIONSHIPS

By Dawn Rego

The Washington State Arts Commission, supported by The Wallace Foundation, is presenting a series of public forums exploring arts participation, the arts and changing demographics, and the use of technology to increase audiences. Seattle writer Dawn Rego provides her personal reflections after a recent forum and workshops attended by arts organizations and arts funders in our region. The event referenced was held December 13, 2012, at Seattle Center. For more information about the Arts Participation Leadership Initiative, see www.arts.wa.gov or Facebook "Washington Arts."

How do we build new audiences and reach new potential patrons? How do we meaningfully engage audiences? What are the strategies to effectively reach youth and/or diverse populations? How do we make culture and art more accessible to more people? These, among so many other questions, continue to be debated and discussed by arts organization everywhere.

The questions are deceptively simple yet don't have straightforward or easy answers. Given the diversity of arts organizations, it may feel like there are more questions than answers but in a word, it's all about *relationships*. These relationships exist on many different levels. Between the art/artist and the consumer, the arts organization and the patron, and the art consumers and the personal networks that they will use to encourage others to share in the same cultural experience. Arts organizations must have ongoing conversations about how to procure, maintain and expand these relationships in order to broaden and deepen the audience's experience so that they will return, and also tell their friends.

On December 13, 2012 a forum and workshop were held at Seattle Center titled “*Connecting with Audiences: Insights from Seattle’s Wallace Excellence Awards.*” The program was hosted by the Washington State Arts Commission as part of its Arts Participation Leadership Initiative, in order to share key audience engagement insights and takeaways so that all arts organization can learn from this initiative.

The Wallace Foundation created an innovative funding partnership where nine Seattle arts institutions were awarded four-year grants ranging from \$500,000 to \$750,000 to support their audience- and participation-building strategies. These Wallace Excellence Awards were presented to Experience Music Project/Science Fiction Museum and Hall of Fame, Teatro ZinZanni, On the Boards, Pacific Northwest Ballet, Seattle Art Museum, Seattle Opera, Seattle Repertory Theatre, Seattle Youth Symphony and SIFF (Cinema Seattle). Through the course of the four years of these grants, nearly 50 research studies were conducted and numerous initiatives were embarked on. Led by Chloe Chittick Patton and Sarah Lee of Slover Linett Strategies, the December 13 forum and workshop were an opportunity for all of the Wallace Excellence Awards recipients to share a number of their initiatives, successes and lessons learned.

As I sat and listened to the presentation by Ms. Chittick Patton and Ms. Lee, many things ran through my mind. I am a cultural consumer. I enjoy the arts and have been known to patronize a number of different arts organizations from small, intimate theatres to large arts institutions. And truth be told, I am in the young adult age demographic, female and a person of color. I was interested to see if any of the Wallace initiatives that specifically targeted my age, gender and ethnic demographic would resonate with me. How would these initiatives affect my relationship with art

and the arts institutions? Would they change my behavior? Would they compel me to attend and share my experience with friends in real life and through social media?

The forum focused on the audience engagement insights and takeaways from the nine Wallace Excellence Awardees that were compiled by Slover Linett and presented by a panel with an audience Q & A. There were so many keen insights gained from these past four years -- many directly relate to building and maintaining relationships with audiences. There were many intersections between the patron, the art, and the patron's experience with the art and artist. And so many more intersections between the patron and the arts organization – is there a personal connection to the organization, is there involvement and investment beyond the audience visit? The panel definitely pointed to intersections of personal relationships, word-of-mouth contact and how individuals share their experience and encourage others to attend. These intersections and relationships encompass the experience, ranging from how one learns about a show, to how a decision is made to attend, from what makes a cultural experience meaningful, to how this experience is shared by the patron.

One finding that was clear is that the patron connection with the art must hit on both intellectual and emotional levels. Ms. Chittick Patton gave an example of the Seattle Art Museum's (SAM) research with young adults, that shows they want to discover the external world but also want a personal experience of self-discovery through the art. They also found that people feel like they need a baseline level of knowledge before they can meaningfully engage with the art. While this is a perception, it may not be true in practice.

For art consumers there are many different factors that play into the decision to attend a cultural experience. Price is definitely a factor but what was interesting was that the perceived value was also

a factor. The arts organizations must meet the expectation of the consumer. Loyalty and commitment will only come once audiences feel they know the arts experience. They can only establish a relationship once trust is established. Traditional subscription models are on the decline and ticket-buying flexibility is increasingly important. The arts consumer will consider attending a cultural experience if the value is there (both monetary and perceived), if they trust the organization, and if there is flexibility within their choice.

I find this true in my personal life as I had been a subscriber to a couple of arts organizations but have since moved towards purchasing individual tickets instead. The need for increased flexibility due to my family, work and volunteer commitments has outweighed the discounts gained through any subscription model.

Deep audience and patron engagement needs to be nurtured and cultivated throughout the duration of the relationship – for new and longtime attendees and everyone in between. Even seasoned patrons need to be nurtured; they yearn for new and fresh experiences. Personal linkages help arts consumers feel connected and affiliated with the organization – either through a friend/family member or with the “human face” of the organization. Ideas for achieving this include: have a live person give a pre-show talk or welcome to the audience, train front-of-house staff in welcoming customer service, and send a post show email with a quote from a performer that encourages the patron to return.

And it's not only about audience database and records – this only captures a fraction of the audience data and their thoughts/perceptions. The relationship needs to go beyond a name in a database.

Think about it like an online dating profile – it can give a snapshot of an individual and will help you

to determine if this person is a good fit. But ultimately it's about the relationship – dating, trying new things, special experiences, conversations and connections. All of these things must be nurtured in order to keep a healthy relationship with your partner through the long term – similar to what arts organizations can do to cultivate and maintain a meaningful relationship and engagement with their audience and patrons.

What is the most powerful communication and outreach tool? It's the personal connection that word-of-mouth provides. This not only will convey the experience but also the story behind it so friends can understand what the experience was like. My first experience with one of the Wallace Excellence Awardees was through a co-worker encouraging me to visit On the Boards. He had attended *12 Minutes Max* and loved the show. I had worked blocks away from OtB for a number of years, had always been curious, but had never attended a performance there. I was personally intrigued by the access to new and emerging pieces and I felt compelled to support these artists. A couple of months later, I attended my first performance and since then, have attended performances there as often as my schedule allows. It was this personal connection and story that introduced me to *12 Minutes Max* and I now in turn promote this series to friends and acquaintances.

Technology is a tool for engagement as well as an opportunity to view art in a new way. But it is not the end but rather a means to get to the end. The Forum panel presentation by On the Boards was an example of the use of technology. It was used to bring art to new audiences through an online portal – On the Boards TV. This allowed audiences in all 50 states and in over 119 countries to view high-quality, full-length performances and thus expanded their reach as an arts organization.

Similarly, social media can also be a powerful tool. It can be a means to share an experience with networks and friends. But technology and social media are not primary ways for individuals to learn

about new cultural institutions. Users typically are already affiliated and familiar with the organization offline. Getting beyond your existing base and achieving meaningful engagement will not be achieved by online initiatives alone.

What about specific audiences – new audiences, young adult, teens, family and culturally-specific audiences? How can arts organizations engage with these audiences and provide a meaningful experience? New audiences are often self-conscious about their newness and attending unfamiliar cultural experiences can feel more like work than fun. Arts organizations need to remember to think about the experience from the point of view of new attendees. A comment from a workshop attendee that many times new attendees do not know when to clap – is it when the music stops or is it when the conductor lowers his hands? It's such a simple question yet many times overlooked by arts organizations. Young adult audiences are sensitive to practical barriers like price and schedule. They're savvy consumers and are looking for social and interactive experiences that are integrated into the art experience. Teen audiences want to be included and welcomed in the experience and don't want to be treated like kids. Those working directly with the teens say parental support plays a vital role in their experience. Families have a complex decision-making process and must cater to the needs of multiple age ranges. Culturally-specific audiences want to connect with their own heritage and community but also want to find a way to connect with other people, cultures and traditions.

During a break in the Forum, I chatted with a few people seated at my table. I asked them what they thought of the presentation so far. The one consistent thing that I heard was “This is great but we're a small arts organization that doesn't have a fraction of the budget that these organizations have, where do I start? Where are the practical tips that I can take back to my office?” Ms. Lee of Slover

Linett then presented ten key audience engagement takeaways that can be implemented and utilized by any organization. These tips are:

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 – make the organization more personal, more humane
3. Provide tools to help audiences share cultural experiences with others – people share because it is valuable to the giver and receiver
4. For online mediums, 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 – so they can know more about the work
6. Programs or activities that are social in nature should also be art- and/or content-focused – it is a way to engage with the art and a way to understand art better
7. Bring audiences behind-the-scenes to make the artistic process more accessible, familiar and relatable – make connections with the people involved with the artistic process, not just participate in the product
8. Go beyond opening your doors to newcomers – actively invite them and then welcome, orient and listen to them – be sure to invite them so newcomers know that you want them there
9. Be wary of over-discounting; emphasize the value and benefits of the experience to make the cost “worth it” – emphasize the “real value”

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 – people need an active reason to participate and attend

The latter portion of the forum included a panel presentation with key representatives from four of the Wallace Excellence Award recipients who discussed a few of the engagement takeaways. The panel included: Katie Jackman, Director of External Relations at the Seattle Repertory Theatre; Alvin Henry, Director of Marketing and Communication at the Seattle Opera; Sandra Jackson-Dumont, Deputy Director for Education and Public Programs/Adjunct Curator for the Seattle Art Museum, and Sarah Wilke, Managing Director at On the Boards. Each panelist discussed their organization's experience with one of the takeaways and answered questions from the audience. This was one of my favorite portions of the program as we learned about many of the initiatives that the Wallace Excellence Award recipients worked on – their successes as well as some of the lessons learned.

The first panelist to speak was Ms. Jackman from the Seattle Repertory Theatre and she discussed takeaway #3: to provide tools to help audiences share cultural experiences with others. They utilized word-of-mouth as one of the primary means to market their performances through the use of three tools. The first was Play Pass. The Seattle Rep identified loyal patrons who, based on purchasing history, would likely attend and bring others with them. Each patron was sent a \$50 coupon that they could then share with someone who would be interested in attending a show. The price point of the coupon was an important factor – it represented a number of different options as they could purchase regular tickets, teen tickets or use it towards a group. Each coupon was unique to the individual so it could then be tracked. The second tool allowed the patron to share immediately that

they purchased a ticket to attend a show at the Seattle Rep and invite their friends via social media. This tool is being re-launched soon. In the third tool, the patron receives an email post-show that has a direct link to social media. It's like a personal endorsement from the patron that they can then share with their friends and includes a small \$5 discount. Each of these tools plays on word-of-mouth marketing that can be effective for arts organizations because it capitalizes on the relationship of the patron with their networks in order to get the word out about the Seattle Rep and their shows.

The second panelist to present was Mr. Henry from the Seattle Opera and he discussed takeaway #7: to bring audiences behind-the-scenes to make the artistic process more accessible, familiar and relatable. The funds they received from the support of The Wallace Foundation allowed for four new technologies and initiatives. This included creating virtual communities, partnering with community and other arts organizations, getting the audience involved with the art of opera and culminated with the simulcast of *Madame Butterfly*. My partner and I were subscribers at the Seattle Opera for a couple of years and we had noticed a couple of the new initiatives that have been enacted. One that piqued my interest was a quick change video produced during the performances of *The Magic Flute*. It provided a backstage view of a 90 second change during a performance and really shows the precision, speed and artwork that occurring during each performance. Personally what I found so cool and interesting about this video is that I never knew the sheer manpower needed (three people per performer!) in order to put together the opera production that I saw the week prior. It was a perfect way to engage me, allow me to connect with and learn about the art and it was something I shared with my friends via social media!

During the question and answer section of the panel presentation, the question was asked: “What were the risks and failures that you encountered?” Mr. Henry talked about Seattle Opera’s experience outreaching to the Vietnamese and Veterans communities in conjunction with the world premiere of *Amelia*. They invited representatives from these communities to engage but they found that not every organization was willing and/or able to participate at the level that the Opera wanted. The relationships between the organizations were not already established with mutual trust between the parties. In building collaborations, mutual trust must be established first and foremost so the relationship can be established on solid ground.

Ms. Jackson-Dumont from the Seattle Art Museum (SAM) was the next panelist and discussed takeaway #6: that program or activities that are social in nature should also be art and/or content focused. This four-year process focused on engagement of 18 to 35 year olds that would be measured by return visits, memberships and involvement with SAM. One of the ways that SAM worked on this was with SAM Remix, evening events held at the museum with art, performances, talks, dancing and other creative pursuits. They co-hosted the event with other organizations to create collaboration and synergy, not competition between the artists. They wanted to create a forum where social, intellectual and art intersect and create the buzz that it was such a special night that you HAD to be there.

Ms. Jackson-Dumont also discussed her experiences with youth advisors in the ReGroup program. At first it was a great idea to engage with a group of young leaders who can provide advice to shape the program at SAM. So they invited anyone who wanted to advise to join and soon found that young adults were interested in having an intimate conversational relationship with SAM and wanted to give their thoughts and feedback. But the difficulty was that there was not enough of a targeted,

focused conversation on exactly what they wanted feedback on. Because there was little focus, it became difficult to manage all of the input, feedback and expectations. It could potentially be a great way to engage and strengthen the relationship between the youth and the organization but you need to be specific in what you want and how much you can manage.

The final panelist was Ms. Wilke from On the Boards and she discussed takeaway #9: to be wary of over-discounting; to emphasize the value and benefits of the experience to make the cost “worth it.” She discussed their online initiative to present art through a new venue with On the Boards TV. With this program, they featured high quality, full-length performances on video through a rental and subscription basis that worked to cut down on the barriers of time, cost and travel to the performance. At first there was a perception that because the content was online, it SHOULD be free. OtB emphasized the value and worth of the performances and that there is a cost to art. They wanted to create a new revenue stream to the artists and to stress that these were high quality performances. One point that OtB did learn is that even with an online medium, patrons still wanted the social aspect through in-person screenings across the country. They emphasized the value and benefits of these high quality performances and also worked in a social aspect to online performances.

It is important for arts organizations to build relationships with their patrons at multiple touch points in order to cultivate meaningful engagement that will result in repeat attendees who will share their experience with their friends. People connect and build relationships with people through experiences and stories. We audiences want to feel welcomed and wanted! We want to feel a connection with you and your organization! Teach us about your art, let us socialize and interact with it and give us a sneak peek at how it's created! Give us a reason to show up and tell our friends

about it! Personally, I have a new respect for arts organizations and how much thought and effort can go into cultivating and engaging me as an arts patron.

My advice to arts organizations would be to learn from the Wallace Excellence Awards cohort in their successes, trials and tribulations. There is a wealth of knowledge and experience that has been effective in engaging me. And above all, it's about building and maintaining a relationship with each audience member and taking risks in your efforts. Each of the organizations that has engaged me made me feel like they wanted a relationship with me, always thanked me for attending and looked forward to seeing me next time. These relationships take time, thought and effort. Don't be afraid to try new things for fear of possibly failing. Many of these grantee arts institutions calculated risks and moved on if it didn't quite work out. It may be something like a pre- or post-show email or talk, personal welcome, recruiting a volunteer to create and manage a Facebook page or creating new engagement event with the artist.

Start with a conversation at your organization, try something new and work towards building a long term relationship with your patrons.

Dawn Rego is an independent nonprofit organization consultant and event planner who lives in Seattle.