



CREATE

COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

Community Engagement: What You Need to Know

Nonprofit arts organizations are facing an existential crisis stemming from skyrocketing expenses, rapidly changing demographics, and vastly altered social expectations. The survival of arts organizations hinges on their ability to engage effectively with a far broader range of their communities than has been true in the past. The process by which arts organizations connect with communities is called community engagement.

Definitions

There is a great deal of misunderstanding about community engagement. While acknowledging that the following are definitions developed by ArtsEngaged and are not universally accepted, they reflect years of experience in this work and help with understanding of the concepts and differentiating among them.

Community

A group of people with something in common. [This definition is exclusively intended for use in community engagement work]

Audience Development

Activities undertaken by an arts organization as part of a marketing strategy designed to produce immediate results that benefit the organization: sales, donations, etc. **Principal beneficiary: arts organization.** [Ex: Targeted ticket sales, promotions]

Audience Engagement

Activities undertaken by an arts organization as part of a marketing strategy designed to deepen relationships with current stakeholders. The purpose is, over time, to improve retention, increase frequency, and expand reach through stakeholder networks. **Principal beneficiary: arts organization.** [Ex.: Pre-show/concert talks]

Community Engagement

Activities undertaken by an arts organization as part of a mission strategy designed to build deep relationships between the organization and the communities in which it operates for the purpose of achieving mutual benefit. This results, over the long term, in increased ticket sales and financial support as well as more arts-friendly public policy. The arts and community are equal partners. **Principal beneficiary: community and arts organization.** [Ex.: Joint projects with communities and community organizations]

Is It Community Engagement?

Too often, arts organizations mistake audience development or audience engagement for community engagement. They are all important but they are substantially different. Here are some **criteria for effective community engagement** that can help highlight how it differs from the other two.

- **Pre-Existing Relationship:** Existing relationships built on mutual respect are essential. Beginning a project without a relationship can suggest the community is being “used” to benefit the arts organization.
- **Mutual Benefit:** If the arts organization and the community do not *both* benefit, the project will not be sustainable.
- **Collaborative Design/Implementation:** The arts organization understands the art. The community understands the community. Both areas of expertise are vital.
- **Relationship Maintenance Plan:** If the arts organization “disappears” after the project, there is no relationship and the lesson the community learns that is that it was merely a means to the arts organization’s ends.

Community Connections

Sales, audience development, audience engagement, and community engagement are means by which we connect with the public. In the past, it has been common for arts organizations to adopt an “If we present it, they will come” attitude in which they simply told people about what was happening and assumed someone would respond. But in a world where the consumer is far less predisposed to “buy” the arts than they once were, we need to build relationships with those we hope to be our supporters. We do this by listening.

The charts that follow present a comparison of how this might work in the “We Tell” and “We Listen” scenarios.

We Tell			
<i>Spoiler: <u>Not</u> the way we should be doing business!</i>			
Sales	Audience Development	Audience Engagement	Community Engagement
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This is what’s happening. • Buy a ticket. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This is what’s happening. • This seems to us like a reason you might be interested. • Buy a ticket. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This is what’s happening. • This seems to us like a reason you might be interested. • Here’s something we think is worthwhile/relevant to you about it. • Buy a ticket. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Get a grant • Find some poor people • Tell them why what’s happening is good for them • Be surprised when they don’t show up

It does not take much imagination to understand why one-way communication has very limited success. Two-way conversations—dialogue—should be the default mode for our interactions with the public. Something like this:

We Listen			
Sales	Audience Development	Audience Engagement	Community Engagement
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This is what’s happening. • This is why it’s going to be worth your time and money.* • Buy a ticket. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This is what’s happening. • This is why it’s going to be worth your time and money.* • This seems like a reason you might be especially interested.* • Buy a ticket. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This is what’s happening. • This is why it’s going to be worth your time and money.* • This seems like a reason you might be especially interested.* • Here’s something that might make this even more worthwhile/relevant to you.* • Buy a ticket. 	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Step 1</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pleased to meet you. • Tell me about yourself. • This is what we do. <p style="text-align: center;"><u>Step 2</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If we do [this thing*], will you help us make it better/be successful? <p style="text-align: center;"><u>Step 3 (Post event)</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Let’s keep in touch.

**Suggestions made based on what we learn from listening.*

The Engagement Process—Preparing, Planning, Partnering

Successful community engagement does not happen spontaneously. Like all successful efforts, it depends upon careful preparation, planning, and implementation which, in the case of community engagement, means partnering with communities.

Preparing

In order for community engagement to be effective, the organization needs to make it a core priority. The first step is gaining internal support for engagement and then making a public commitment to it. [See “Can You Say This?” below.] This is followed by training in how to work with communities.

Planning

Once an organization is committed to engagement, it needs to consider how it can best connect, with what communities it should do so, and how the organization’s departments will support engagement. It is particularly important to realize that there can (and should) be very simple first steps in engagement and that such steps will be far more effective than diving off the deep end in expensive, time-consuming projects. Attempting to do too much too fast is unnecessary and counterproductive.

For example, works that would be presented as a matter of course sometimes have themes of interest to communities not connected with the arts. Vivaldi’s *The Seasons* can resonate with people concerned about climate change. Seattle’s Early Music Group programmed Renaissance music written in response to the Black Death in partnering with a group providing relief in African countries dealing with Ebola.

Partnering

Building and maintaining relationships with communities is the essence of community engagement. Critically, current stakeholders—members, subscribers, donors—are a vital community and should be a key focus of first efforts to “engage.” Beyond them, patience is essential. Attempting to do too much too soon is almost inevitably counter-productive. We cannot present—or even suggest—meaningful work until we have a reasonable understanding of the interests of the community with which we want to engage.

*Can You Say This?***SAMPLE: Statement of Commitment to Our Communities**

XYZ Arts, in living out its mission commitment to “[*quote mission re: community engagement*],” sees itself as a resource for improving lives in and strengthening the civic fabric of [*city/geographic region*]. [*Art form we support*] is, of course, valuable in and of itself; yet we also recognize its power as a tool for human betterment. Insofar as our resources permit, we seek to develop mutually beneficial relationships with individuals and organizations to help us further the public good. We will approach these relationships as learners, understanding that our expertise lies in [*art form we support*] and that our partners are the authorities in their fields of interest. Out of these relationships we will develop experiences in which [*art form we support*] supports community goals. We aspire to be a contributor to all things of importance to [*city/geographic region*] and to be recognized as a reliable and flexible collaborator on projects that make [*city/geographic region*] a better place to live.

Board of Directors & CEO/XYZ Arts

For an extended discussion of the inevitable topic of artistic excellence and community engagement, see [Excellence in Community Engagement](http://www.artsengaged.com/excellence) [<http://www.artsengaged.com/excellence>]

Engaging Matters: <http://www.artsjournal.com/engage>

Building Communities, Not Audiences: The Future of the Arts in the United States [<http://www.artsengaged.com/bcna>]

Engage Now! A Guide to Making the Arts Indispensable [<http://artsengaged.com/engage-now>]

Community Engagement Training [<http://www.artsengaged.com/CET>]

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