

Organizational Change: Aligning Goals and Practices to Expand Audiences

Marketing and audience development is easy. Yes, easy. It begins with knowledge of the market, targeting the public you want to serve, and then aligning everything you do to win them.

But oh, that “alignment” process – that’s where it gets hard. It is where fear sets in, where artistry begins to feel threatened, if not compromised. It is where resource issues wage war against long-term thinking. Alignment is, in our view, the major internal challenge and goal for all marketers.

In the Rand Corporation’s “New Framework for Building Participation in the Arts” study, conducted for the Wallace-Reader’s Digest Funds, the challenge is bluntly stated: “institutions must determine how participation building efforts fit with their overall purpose and mission, their available resources, and the community environment in which they operate. In other words, organizations must take an integrative approach to building participation that:

- ✓ Links participation-building activities to core values and purpose through goals chosen to support that purpose;

- ✓ Identifies clear target groups and bases its tactics on good information about these groups;
- ✓ Clearly understands both the internal and external resources that can be committed to building participation; and,
- ✓ Establishes a process for feedback and self-evaluation.

Our work in Durham has been designed to provide solid information on target groups, and to move organizations forward in tactical marketing. Through diagnostic discussions, we’ve begun the process of identifying whether audience goals align with core values. Resources, however, are tougher to obtain. But without the commitment of resources to implement long-term as well as immediate audience development tactics, marketers keep facing the same nearly insurmountable challenges. The old saying that a budget is the clearest distillation of a strategic plan holds true: without a budget that supports audience development – not just season ticket sales or event attendance – organizations cannot expect to see significant changes.

If your organization is going to make one change – just one change – to further its audience



development efforts, it should be to establish a percentage of the marketing budget as “investment” in long-term audience development and organizational positioning. That’s the resource allocation you need to prospect to those new targeted audiences. Though the return on the first year’s worth of work will see little payback, the long-term prognosis is hopeful. The more resources, obviously, the better. But even a small line item signals intent internally and externally, and moves your organization down the path toward truly developing new audiences.

Board Development: Establishing Audience Development Committees

In 19 years of consulting to cultural organizations, we’ve only come across a few organizations that have standing audience development board committees. Many have marketing committees, some have PR or communications committees, and some have advocacy committees. But not audience development. Why not?

Developing audiences – the business of deepening the connections and relationships that individuals who already participate have with your organization, diversifying the face of our audiences to more completely reflect our communities, and expanding our overall audience size – is fundamental to the management of a cultural organizations. Yet it rarely gets the attention it needs at the board level. A modest proposition: change the name and job description of your board marketing or PR committee to that of audience development. Boards are responsible for policy and direction: challenge this committee to evaluate the research concerning your current and potential audiences

and your desired target audience, and how to align your institutional goals and resources accordingly. You’ll be amazed at the difference this makes in your institution’s approach to overall strategic planning, and to building an organization-wide approach to marketing that looks to the future, not simply to immediate tactics.

Planning for Audience Development

Just what is “audience development?” It is more than expanding the size of your audience. In fact, it may be more important to deepen your audience than to expand it. One of our passionate beliefs in our audience development work is that arts and cultural organizations need to work hard at gaining loyalty and ownership from a core group of committed followers. Those “owners” who feel closely connected are going to be the ones who pay admission, volunteer, become members, encourage their friends to get involved. They are going to start the “word of mouth” marketing that is essential to expanding audiences. They are the secret to success.

That means that time spent on building relationships with existing audience members is every bit as important – if not more important – than finding new attendees. How do you build those relationships? There are simple approaches such as capturing names of visitors and sending them follow-up notes or letters, or simply including a personal note when filling a ticket order to let people know how much you value their participation.

What about inviting a group to a roundtable discussion, to give your organization feedback on your programming, your communications and



your education or outreach programs? What about asking them how they'd like your organization to reach out to and involve newcomers? By giving your audience the chance to give input, you build relationships. That leads to greater loyalty and involvement.

A New Audience or More of the Same?

Geodemographic analysis of your current and potential audiences, as well as information gleaned from focus groups and audience surveys give you a wealth of new opportunities to explore. You have at your fingertips detailed characteristics of your current audience and information on how to target and prospect to more households just like them. You also know the flip side: the nature of the audience you don't have, but could win. You have information on their consumer characteristics,

values, media use, and how to reach them. And you can learn how to target them and prospect to them. That's the easy part. The hard part is deciding if you truly want to cultivate them. Basically, research is the road map. You need to decide if you want to take the trip, and then how fast you want to get there. Making these decisions isn't easy, but it can set up a wonderful learning and planning process for your whole organization. The nature of the audience you want determines, in large measure, the nature of what you maintain and change within every aspect of your organization. Once you determine your desired target audience, your organization needs to align everything – programming, image, services, communications, messages, pricing, positioning – to connect with them. So plan your trip carefully. Invest your board as well as all departments in the discussion. Use this dialogue to focus strategic planning. Then hang on – it will be a great ride.

Arts and Culture: The Center of Community

Since September 11, many of our clients nationwide have found themselves serving as gathering places, true community centers where people can connect with their neighbors and renew a sense of place. Yes, it has been a volatile time as well, with some organizations finding few people in line to buy tickets. But others are being successful in communicating a message to their communities of what museums, historical societies, performing arts organizations, and youth arts groups mean to all of us, now more than ever. Robert D. Putnam, in his book *Bowling Alone*, talks of rebuilding community “social capital” through the arts and culture: “Let us find ways to ensure that significantly more Americans will participate in (not merely

consume or ‘appreciate’) cultural activities from group dancing to songfests to community theater

to rap festivals. Let us discover new ways to use the arts as a vehicle for convening diverse groups of fellow citizens...Many of these activities produce great art, but all of them produce great bridging social capital – in some respects an even more impressive achievement.”

Putnam's words, and the need for community touchstones in these post 9-11 days should help us all think about audience development from a larger perspective. What does the community need? What do people need from our arts and cultural organizations? What context, what relevance, what meaning can we offer? How can we invite, nurture and build a shared sense of



community? These questions, too, are at the heart of our diagnostic and planning process.



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