

Relationship, Relevance, Response

These Three Rs of building audiences are particularly important at this time of year. The Holiday Season is always about sharing, and for arts goers the holidays almost always include shared family/social visits to museums or performing arts institutions. Where do they head? To destinations where there is personal meaning, tradition and relevance. At year-end, this is also the time of year when membership and annual giving campaigns make a final appeal.

And why should attenders give to arts and cultural organizations this year? Relationship with your organization, the relevance your programming has to their lives, and the ways in which your organization responds, communicates, shows how much it values each visitor, each buyer, each member, each subscriber. Particularly when consumers perceive their finances to be tight or getting tighter, they seek these three attributes from any nonprofit or community organization. The more your organization demonstrates and describes how it cares about its audience and constantly seeks to be relevant, the better.

Building Relevance: Listening to your Public

ArtsMarket recently completed a 1,000 household public opinion survey¹ here in Montana, asking residents what they value about the arts, and what motivates them to attend or not attend. As a highly rural state, Montana is a good weather vane for testing audience and public opinion in all rural areas. Our survey, in fact, was based on questions that arts managers throughout the country wanted answered about public perception and attitudes in underserved areas. Our sense is the findings are applicable not only when your organization seeks to reach out into rural fringes around Durham, but also are meaningful for urban-oriented organizations that want to build participation among inclined and disinclined patrons.

Our key findings support the importance of the Three Rs of audience development:

- ◆ Personal relevance – or the lack of relevance – was the most significant

¹ Funded by the Montana Arts Council and the Wallace Reader's Digest Fund.

potential barrier (or motivator) to attend arts events or destinations.

- ◆ Sharing the experience of attending, particularly with family members, was seen as more important than personal interest in the art form, or even the quality of the art. Arts experiences are about relationships.
- ◆ Experiencing the arts should be fun! That was the top desired attribute of arts participation by 1,000 households. Too often arts experiences are instead described as “hard” and “requiring special knowledge.” (These are statements that have been made and reinforced in scores of focus groups we have done around the country.) So, how do we change perceptions so it is easier and enjoyable to participate?
- ◆ What is a significant potential barrier to participation – and we’d suspect – to overall contributions and support? We have found attenders and non-attenders question the quality and strength of management – the institutional image. In other words, people out there don’t know for certain that arts organizations are well-run, strong, sustainable institutions.

Taking a look at these findings alone, it is possible to shape a series of strong audience development strategies. They require real thinking about institutional positioning, about the nature of the experience that your organization offers and about how that experience is communicated. Then, there is the need for listening to your audience, response and follow-up.

Our sense is that the Three Rs need and deserve great emphasis this year, post 9-11, and as the economy changes. Ask your organization to examine its Three Rs in the context of your mission and overall goals. Consider how every aspect of your organization, be it curatorial or artistic programming, fund development or educational offerings, answer the challenge of the Three Rs. Communicate your response to your attenders and new prospects alike.

Price Strategies in a Recession Economy

There is no question that Americans have tightened their spending habits, and this has potential impact on ticket sales and membership purchase. The December issue of *American Demographics* reports post 9-11 consumer research showing that more Americans think this is not a good time to “shop,” and we would consider purchase of expensive tickets as a part of “shopping.” The report says, “A blend of

idealism and pragmatism is emerging. Marketers should appeal to consumers’ desire for value – not only in a fiscal sense, but in a moral sense as well. Americans want good quality and good value from good companies doing good things. Offering affordable, durable, smart goods and services appeals to their yearning for comfort, stability and reassurance. Marketing messages



should be straightforward, honest and down-to-earth.”

This is important advice to all arts and cultural organizations. The overall concept of value, beyond financial value, is particularly important to convey. So too is the sense of “good companies.” This research meshes well with our findings from the Montana survey reported above. Arts and cultural organizations have to communicate their value to community, to audiences, to our lives. And, as we said in last

month’s newsletter, this is the time for straightforward communications about the importance of our organizations, their meaning to community and why people should get involved. Does your membership brochure really tell people why they are valuable to your organization, why you need them and what you offer in return? Does your subscription and season brochure respond to that need for value, both in terms of financial incentives and in quality, great experiences and “smart” programming?

The Arts and Family

It isn’t a surprise. Family time is suddenly more precious, more important. Scores of surveys post 9-11 show that designating “more family time” and the desire to share memory-making family experiences has grown significantly among households with children. Suddenly, the appeal of arts experiences as “date night out” has faded. The prospect of leaving kids with baby sitters has weakened. The need for family-rich shared experiences has grown. So what can you do?

Make sure your attenders and prospects know what performances and exhibitions are good for what age groups. Inform parents, and urge them to bring their families. Kids relate incredibly well

to challenging exhibitions (within age-appropriate limits, of course), and to a wide range of performing arts. Think about that desire for relevance: kids want more from the arts than simply attending the annual Nutcracker! Let parents know what to expect, what your own kids liked and how you would recommend preparing for the experience in advance. We loved a web site we recently saw for a contemporary theater company that did a parent FAQ and advised what shows were right for what ages, gave some background to sooth parent concerns about each show and advised what shows wouldn’t make for great family experiences.

Our Year-End Thank You

This last newsletter of 2001 is our chance to thank you for the privilege of working with you and each of your organizations. We believe strongly, passionately, in what you do and hope our research and implementation ideas can help

make a difference in your ability to reach, be relevant to and shape responses to an ever-larger audience. As of 2002, we will have researched and provided counsel about audiences for 20 years, and through those two decades we have



seen arts and cultural organizations weather many ups and downs of participation, funding, and support. Perhaps we shouldn't be surprised that our clients and the many other organizations we have studied and evaluated have done some of their most significant organizational and community development when times have been tough. We have enormous confidence in the arts' abilities to survive and, yes, thrive, though times of changing consumer habits and economic uncertainty.

A new Rand Corporation study completed for Pew Charitable Trusts questions the ability of midsize arts and cultural organizations to survive in the coming years, given changes in funding patterns and the continued growing complexities of marketing and development. While this should be a warning, it shouldn't be a scare. We know from all of you that midsize organizations may lack an abundance of resources, but have the zeal and ability to build strong personal relationships with audience, community and funders. And it is this same zeal that serves large institutions well, in responding intensely and purposefully to community wants, concerns and needs.

Thank you for never losing that zeal and for allowing us to work side by side with you to share it with an ever-growing audience. May your holidays be wonderful and meaningful. And may 2002 be a year of great success!