

# FUNDAMENTAL STRATEGIES

Some general strategies in audience development emerged through the Audience Development Institute, and most, if not all, are applicable to any arts group seeking to build a loyal and diverse audience base:

1. **Assume nothing.**
2. **Know the marketplace.**
3. **Go deeper.**
4. **Cultivate the future.**
5. **Think beyond print.**
6. **Lift up the loyal.**
7. **Pick your niches**
8. **Repeat often.**
9. **Collaborate and reinforce messages**

**1. Assume nothing.** It is all too easy for arts administrators to assume that the general public knows at least *something* about their organizations. Audiences in the Triangle region of North Carolina made it clear to ADI participants that there was a big gap between name recognition and actual understanding of what various arts organizations bring to the marketplace. Indeed, prospective arts patrons, as it turned out, have little or no understanding of what arts activities are available in the region. The large influx of newcomers and the general transience of many young professionals in the area require that arts providers constantly work on positioning and name recognition.

**2. Know the marketplace.** Almost every participating organization in the ADI study admitted to some surprise at the findings of the surveys and focus groups. We may think we know our audiences, but no marketplace is static. Surveying audiences and

conducting focus groups must be a constant part of any audience development and customer service strategy.

**3. Go deeper.** Chances are, your community has a number of particular niches within niches, and reaching these groups may be a very low-tech and inexpensive advertising proposition. Word of mouth is still powerful (if not the most powerful) advertising. Connecting with grassroots organizations that share a common interest in the content, genre or culture represented in particular exhibits or performances can be an important way to build recognition and new audiences. Putting small notices in organizational newsletters or distributing flyers to church groups are old-fashioned but still effective ways to deepen connections in the many communities your organization aspires to serve.

**4. Cultivate the future.** Arts organizations that do not attend to younger audience groups are doomed to diminish as their loyal audiences age out. As mentioned in the previous section, younger audiences may prefer to get their information in different ways, may not be willing to buy season tickets, and may have other particular kinds of resistance to your offerings that must be addressed up front. But strategic planning must take into account how the organization will cultivate loyal audiences that are bound to change over time.

**5. Think beyond print.** ADI participants tested a number of less traditional advertising vehicles that worked: Cinema advertising (animated or still messages in advance of feature films) brought positive results in driving prospects to one organization's website. Websites themselves are becoming increasingly popular as a means for individuals -- young and old -- to obtain scheduling information and to purchase tickets. Many audience segments have also come to prefer e-mail notices over printed materials. The expense and sheer glut of print messages today require that arts organizations with scarce advertising dollars think more creatively about alternative

vehicles to convey their stories to loyal patrons and newcomers alike. In the wake of so many advertising messages bombarding us daily, arts organizations will be well served to cultivate new ways of networking among individuals and their affinity groups to get the message out.

**6. Lift up the loyal.** Maintaining loyal audience members is always less expensive than identifying and building new audiences, and retaining the loyal also helps generate the necessary resources to grow in new directions. Making sure that the steady supporters are applauded while also developing a program to recognize newcomers is critical. First-time attendees might receive a letter saying "thanks for coming" along with a second offer that ups the ante for continuing participation such as "bring a friend for free." As Louise Stevens of ArtsMarket puts it: "The best loyalty program is your box of stationery." Making personal, individualized contact with audience members is more effective than most any other means of communication.

**7. Pick your niches.** Understanding the total arts landscape in a region will help each individual organization capitalize on its strengths and recognize its potential position in the mix. Addressing all prospective audience groups at once is rarely feasible. As a number of the ADI participants found, connecting with particular groups for individual events is one avenue to developing new connections. Rotating among niches in the effort to connect and build audience loyalty and anticipation for different events is more manageable than trying to be all things to all people all the time. Targeting different audience segments may require different communications strategies, various kinds of special offers that help overcome resistance, alternate scheduling of performances and events, or the choice of more convenient venues depending on the target group. One size never fits all.

**8. Repeat often.** More than anything else, good marketing requires good research, and research becomes quickly dated. Developing a rigorous program of ongoing audience

assessment, measuring customer satisfaction, and evaluating changes in community demographics and psychographics are all essential for the long-term sustainability of any arts organization.

**10. Collaborate and reinforce messages.** Arts events and classes are not inexpensive to produce. Audiences must therefore be educated on both the cost and the intrinsic value of arts activities in our communities. Particularly in a time of economic retrenchment, it becomes ever more crucial for arts organizations in a community or region to collaborate and reinforce each other's messages. But the effort to collaborate must go beyond promoting each other's events to emphasize the economic impact of the arts as an *industry*. Arts groups must move from isolated work toward a symbiotic, collaborative community of presenting/learning organizations. At best in any community, the arts should come across as a unified, powerful player in the culture and quality of life for citizens.