

# "Balancing New & Core Audiences" Roundtable

*A Tricky Juggling Act*

Facilitated by Deborah Johnson-Hall

The Chicago Wallace Audience Engagement Network (CWAEN) gathered at the Merit School of Music recently for another in a series of roundtables to foster dialogue and share ideas about issues being experienced as they implement their grant awards from the Wallace Foundation and the Chicago Community Trust.

The topic: how to balance the efforts made toward the new audiences you're working to attract with the core and stakeholder audiences you already rely on.

## **Speaker and Presenter**

Setting the context for the discussion was Diane Grams, co-author of *Entering Cultural Communities: Diversity and Change in the Nonprofit Arts* and currently a professor of sociology at Tulane University in New Orleans.

Rhoda Rosen, director of the Spertus Museum at the Spertus Institute of Jewish Studies, also presented her take on the premature cancellation of the museum's *Imaginary Coordinates* exhibition this past summer. This highly anticipated and controversial exhibit was intended to attract Arab and Palestinian audiences and stimulate dialogue at a very emotional time – the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Jewish state. However, some of the museum's stakeholders (core audience) forced the cancellation of the exhibit after only a couple of weeks.

While this was considered an extreme case, groups admitted that there can often be more subtle signs that either new or core audiences may have issues about sharing the same space.

## **How New Audiences are Chosen**

To isolate and then resolve barriers to arts participation, grantees agreed that you have to be able to identify and understand the target audience you're trying to attract. However, some of the methods used to do that vary from the simple to the sublime:

- It's anyone we don't already have
- Just pick one based on demographics (e.g., age)
- Geographically based on proximity to our venue or to other/core audiences
- Psychographic profiles

## **The Core Leads the Way**

Others felt that having a firm grip on the core audience is the best way to determine a target for new audiences. The notion of having to blend the two, the "old" with the "new," is a consideration some groups carefully make before they tackle barriers and the strategies to resolve them.

Audiences, regardless of the genre or type of institution, develop their own customs or rituals to interact with each other, as well as respond to the art and artists. For example, Diane Grams mentioned the simple act of knowing when to applaud is something that the core audience knows but newcomers may not. And the new audiences own social culture may not be aligned with that particular way of responding.

To illustrate, Diane explained that African-American and Latin audiences tend to applaud or react when they hear or see something they like, whenever that occurs. For certain kinds of performance, core audiences may applaud only at the end of a movement, scene or act. Just this difference can present an uncomfortable and off-putting barrier for a new visitor who responds or applauds at the "wrong" time.

## **What Drives Core Can Lead to More**

It's also important to make sure you know *why* your core audience continues to come to *you*, especially when there are so many other choices. You may discover some qualities that have been overlooked or

taken for granted that might also appeal to new audiences.

Keep in mind, as well, that quantifying the real cost of acquisition of new audiences vs. retention of the core can be an eye-opener. Jim Hirsch (Chicago Sinfonietta) said he developed an ROI formula to do just that.

"I was shocked at how valuable our long-time patrons are. The advice I would give to anyone is to do that exercise," Jim advised. "You will be amazed."

Attendees felt core audiences are loyal to them because they . . .

- Are attracted to the mission of the organization (e.g., diversity)
- Like the variety of programming
- Love the genre and what the organization does with it
- Are aesthetically motivated
- Are attracted by cultural identity

Some groups said they would like to move those driven by cultural identity to be more motivated, instead, by aesthetics.

### **Perceived Barriers**

The barriers these groups feel new audiences face include:

- Money/cost
- Time
- Too difficult to come/too much effort
- Bad past experience
- Poor communication
  - Whether they receive it or not
  - Misunderstanding/unclear information
  - Poor customer service (*not* answering questions, offering solutions, solving problems, showing appreciation, etc.)
- Historical/old image
- Lack of institutional money and capacity
- Staff
- Lack of arts education and exposure (e.g., via families)
- Lack of awareness of arts providers/institutions
- Core means ownership, relationship, interaction and sometimes they are

not ready to accept new people into the "family"

Ms. Grams cautioned everyone that the fundamental solution to successfully tackling barriers and balancing new and core audiences efforts is to collect and internalize more data and information.

"We must gather the data to track and understand what's happening," Diane stated, "to know what the experiences really are and what motivates audiences to commit."

### **Potential Best Practices**

All the grantees have used a variety of methods to overcome audience barriers of target newcomers. Some of the more successful include the following:

- Providing personal/personalized attention
- Emphasizing subscriber retention, like holding parties with personal interaction with artists/staff
- Make phone calls to first-time visitors just to thank them – NO selling
- Showing appreciation to subscribers, even if it's small and inexpensive it's well-received
- Organizing smaller groups around some common interest (e.g., the Newberry Library has a "Society of Collectors" composed of people who just like to donate to or build all kinds of collections)
- Behind-the-scenes or backstage tours and events (e.g., the Dance Center of Columbia College has movement classes onstage for families with kids)
- Free tours or admissions
- Reflect new audiences in collateral and communications (e.g., website)

Overall, whether it's tackling barriers, blending audiences or expanding or building deeper relationships with current audiences, the group was admonished to continually improve technology and data management tools and be aggressive and opportunistic about gathering data and insight from and about their audiences.