



CREATE

COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

Embarking on Community Engagement

I. Initial Steps: Simple and Slow

Community engagement is important to the long-term viability of arts organizations and to the well-being of the communities they serve. If you don't believe that, you may stop reading here. All of what follows discusses "how," not "whether" or "why?"

Effective community engagement begins with an organizational commitment to it. Half measures or "funder-made-me-do-it" projects will quickly wither on the vine. Communities easily detect insincerity. Only after a commitment is made is it time to think about "doing" community engagement.

Simple

Upon committing to engagement, the compulsion to do something immediately is misguided. (It is also entirely understandable. We are an event-driven industry.) The production of arts experiences that will be the expression of community engagement must come out of a relationship building process. That process must happen *first*, so nothing should be put in the hall, on the boards, or on the walls immediately.

In addition, initial efforts will not/should not be time-consuming or expensive. Things will develop organically as habits of mind change from artcentric to community-aware. When arts organization staff members (all departments) see a portion of their work as serving the interests of external communities, they will begin to rethink the things they are already doing with budgets that already exist.

Unfortunately, too many people simply cannot believe this. Examples of commissioned operas, multi-city story-capturing and -telling efforts, and cities transformed by multi-year dance company projects make people think good community engagement is impossibly expensive and/or labor-intensive. Such bells and whistles stories are almost all the culmination of years of community relationship building and herculean funding efforts.

Instead, simple is not only possible but vital at the outset. First steps can begin with the realization that *West Side Story* is about (among other things) immigration and gang violence; that Vivaldi's *Spring* can be an expression of environmental awareness; that Renaissance music inspired by the Plague is about a deadly public health crisis; and that virtually every work of art we would be programming anyway in some way or another reflects issues of importance to people today. In addition, the work of each department of an arts organization outside of programming (those big enough and lucky enough to *have* departments) can be refocused in simple ways to support community engagement efforts. (One example: marketing focus groups can add a few questions to aid development of two-way relationships between the participants and the organization rather than the traditional one-way information gathering.)

Blockbuster community engagement projects are thrilling to examine and can serve as prods to greater efforts. However, especially at the beginning, they can also inspire despair that change is impossible.

Slow

Some in the arts industry express concern that pursuing community engagement will drive current stakeholders with imagined precipitous changes to the organization and/or its offerings. There are a couple of responses to this that should be comforting. First, community engagement should *begin* with the community that is your core constituents. Getting their feedback on plans and involving them in the process of making your organization indispensable to the larger community can make of them allies and cheerleaders in all engagement processes.

Second, **in successful engagement work no change should happen quickly**. It is important to reassure stakeholders that it is possible (preferable) to begin engagement work incrementally. The next show/season will not suddenly consist of work foreign to the current staff and support base. Indeed, relationship building is time-consuming work so the results of engagement with new communities should not be immediate or pervasive. This is one place where the lengthy process of engagement is a benefit.

We in the arts have an understandable desire to rush to action. Ours is an event production business. We exist to *do*. In community engagement work, though, this instinct 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. Careening into production prematurely is usually at best off-putting and at worst offensive. Give the relationship time to reveal how best to partner with a new community.

Initial steps in engagement should be, must be, small. Too much too soon will drive people away. This applies to programming, marketing and sales, fundraising, governance, evaluation—all aspects of organizational function. The common denominator of this approach is as simple, inexpensive, and excruciatingly difficult as changing habits of mind. **The essential transition is to stop seeing the work as delivering a product that *should be* consumed by a nameless, faceless public and to view it instead as a valuable resource for specific individuals and communities *whom we know* (or are getting to know).** When the board and staff of arts organizations makes this switch and apply it to how they go about their existing tasks, the results will begin to support the work of deep engagement with communities.

II. Initial Means of Connecting

Relationship building begins, of course, with making connections with communities. This need not, and in the beginning should not, be complicated.

Be What You Are: Connect as Social Catalyst

On the most basic level, arts events bring people together, literally. In order to participate, attendees must be in a particular place at a particular time. This is absolute for the performing arts. For the visual arts the “place” part is fixed as well. The “time” issue can be more fluid, but for openings and exhibition-related activities it is the same as the performing arts.

This provides the opportunity to act as a social connector or social catalyst *without needing to change anything about the work presented*. Providing communities a place (and excuse) to gather together can be a great service and can be a means of beginning to develop relationships with those communities.

Promoting affinity group gatherings (singles, parents of young children, corporate staff members, professional associations—accountants, lawyers, real estate brokers) are already part of marketing efforts of at least some arts organizations. Including other communities is no more complex than learning who they are: *e.g.*, West End Co-op, 13th Street Neighborhood Association, Hispanic League, Black Philanthropists, etc.

This work need not be time intensive. It certainly should not be new work. Simply reaching out and providing a labeled opportunity to the groups can be enough.

And while you have the people in these groups together, why not talk with them, learn about them? If you feel you must you can tell them about yourself, but make sure you tell them no more than you find

out about them. One-sided conversations (or those dominated by one party) do not foster good relationships.

If this sounds like an added burden, if you have not been doing this already, that's a fault of marketing efforts, not an added job necessitated by community engagement. A truth of effective community engagement is that it often employs principles of good marketing which should be part of your work even if you are not planning to commit to engagement as a core organizational function.

The time/place essence of arts events provides an ideal means of connecting with groups of people. The beauty of this ability to serve as a social catalyst is that nothing different need be done about the art presented. As your relationship with these groups develops you may want to consider offerings that *do* speak in some direct way to them. But that is (and should be) a good way on down the road.

Share What You Have: Connect as Community Citizen

Another means of connecting with communities that does not have an impact upon programming is the sharing organizational resources—physical, human, and infrastructural. In the context of community engagement, the point is to provide benefit to communities as a means of developing trust and supporting relationship building. Think of it as lending a neighbor a cup of sugar. And to be clear, this does not suggest anything that would have a significant impact on the budget or staff.

Awareness of community needs and interests can help inform how this might look. Some organizations that have their own facilities provide community groups with meeting space. After Hurricane Sandy, a theatre company in Manhattan put a generator on the street outside their offices so people could charge their cell phones. It took awareness of the need and the company's self-identification as a member of the community to inspire that action.

An interesting idea proposed by museum director, community engagement advocate, and writer Nina Simon is the use of an arts organization's presenting platforms to build relationships. In [The Future of Authority: Platform Power](https://museumtwo.blogspot.com/2008/10/future-of-authority-platform-power.html) [https://museumtwo.blogspot.com/2008/10/future-of-authority-platform-power.html] she suggested "that museums could give up control of the visitor experience while still maintaining (a new kind of) power. Museums could make the platforms for those experiences. There is power IN the platform--power to shape the way people participate." In other words, presenting forums could be made available to communities. Whether community organized pop-up exhibitions in the museum or performances of community-based cultural resources, the organization's platform could be a significant tool for substantive engagement.

Another type of resource sharing is the joint fundraiser or cause-related marketing of tickets. I have always had trouble with people describing fundraisers or ticket sales where a portion goes to a charitable organization (cause-related marketing) as community engagement. True engagement requires more mutuality and more of a two-way relationship than such practices usually involve. However, fundraisers and ticket sales are an infrastructural platform that arts organizations possess and sharing revenue from either *is* a valid way to provide something of benefit to a community organization. To be clear, these things cannot be looked on as the culmination of any community engagement effort. However, they can be an element of a larger process of relationship building.

Present What You Do: Connect through the Art

The most important attribute of any arts organization is, of course, the art it presents. To many people, committing to community engagement raises images (and fears) of rapid, monumental, systemic change. While significant change may result eventually—but only after the organization and the communities it is attempting to reach are both ready—there is much that can be done with little or no change to currently offered programming.

Ours is an event-driven, action-oriented industry. When we commit to a new way of thinking we want to *do*. But premature “doing”—programming without real knowledge of or input from a community—can feel invasive to them. It can also be viewed as a simple ploy to sell tickets or secure grant funds. This will do nothing to build trust and develop relationships.

Fortunately, the first step for most arts organizations should simply be imagining what currently scheduled performances or exhibitions might look like to communities they hope to reach. As mentioned before, seeing *West Side Story* as tale of immigrant conflict and gang violence is a good illustration. Most cities have issues with both. Being aware of the themes, background, or history of the works presented *and* of the interests of local communities can provide flashes of insight into ways to connect.

Of course if those flashes involve communities with which no relationship currently exists, there is a very real danger that approaching them will appear self-serving. A public commitment to relationship building, respect, and mutual benefit could help to pave the way. [See sample statement at end of article.*] In addition, if there is no current relationship, there is no guarantee that the themes you identify will *actually* be meaningful to those communities. But making the effort, acknowledging the organization’s need to learn, is probably better than nothing.

Far better, of course, is having relationships with communities and identifying themes that you therefore know will be of significance to them. Relationship building, like pure scientific research, is intended to lay foundations upon which to build, not knowing what the end might be. And the relationship building should have higher success rates than pure research.

Over time, as relationships develop, selection of works to present can be informed by what is known about the communities with which you are working. These selections, especially in the beginning, can and probably should be of work that would have been presented anyway. The timing of the presentation will simply be helpful in deepening the relationship.

Only in the long term will it be beneficial to solicit community input on programming. ***This should not be taking a poll of “What they want.”*** Rather, knowing the issues that speak to them and that they would like to address, the arts organization can make suggestions about works that might serve those ends.

III. Engagement at the Core: Mainstreaming Engagement

At the risk of repetition, the key to successful engagement “is as simple, inexpensive, and excruciatingly difficult as changing habits of mind. The essential transition is to stop seeing our work as delivering a product that *should be* consumed by a nameless, faceless public and to view it instead as a valuable resource for specific individuals and communities *whom we know* (or are getting to know).” This applies equally to early efforts and mature ones. At the beginning, all internal stakeholders in an arts organization should continue their work as is and simply imagine how a commitment to relationship building might affect and improve their results.

Community-Focused/Aware Marketing

The emphasis here is on the small, simple, inexpensive things that can be done to pursue community engagement in the early days of such efforts. That would be true of what follows if our industry’s marketing were grounded in audience awareness. Unfortunately, often it is not. It has, historically, been self-focused, self-referential, and what I love to call artcentric. So, **while what’s needed demands, for many organizations, a seismic shift, that is not the fault of community engagement. It’s the fault of our marketing history and practices.**

Engaged Promotion

What's necessary *is* simple—organize marketing efforts around the interests of the people you're trying to reach; to do this, you need to understand them; and to do that, you need to talk with (not at) them. (Certainly it is possible to survey them; but it should be a well-constructed survey. And be sure to *respond* to what they say.) Once you know about the people you want to reach, construct your messages in such a way that they might pay attention. Why should they spend their time and money on what you have to offer?

Relationship-Based Marketing

Phase II of engaged marketing is rooted in the relationships you have with the people you are trying to reach. (This is why the “survey only” can only take you so far. Surveys don't build relationships.) When communities trust and value an organization they will pay more attention to communication from it. And, of course, the communication will be far better targeted so that it will be more effective.

How To

The practicalities of this go far beyond the scope of this blog post. So, I'm calling upon a couple of experts (and providing links) for readers to follow. For details, see [Know Your Communities](#).

[<http://www.artsjournal.com/engage/2018/02/know-your-communities/>] Simply put, in this blog post, Aubrey Bergauer of the California Symphony presents a detailed plan focusing on “patron retention” designed to significantly improve traditional arts marketing practices. And, in a valuable contribution to the field arts marketing expert Trevor O'Donnell, explains that the solution to self-focused and self-aggrandizing arts marketing is to “talk to people.” [Want Good Copy? Say It Then Write It](#)

[<https://trevorodonnell.com/2018/01/25/want-good-copy-say-it-then-write-it/>]

What these two say, if applied, would make their application to community engagement a completely seamless transition, one that would require virtually no extra work for the organization except perhaps talking to more people. The fact that this is not the case is, as I said before, not the fault of community engagement.

Yes, truly effective marketing may necessitate major change. However, the required change is something that needs to be done regardless of whether you're interested in community engagement. The simple economics of soaring costs and the most basic principles of marketing demand it. So, if this change is essential, why don't you maximize your return and develop relationships with new communities while you're at it?

Fundraising

Fundraising is (or should be) about relationship building and so is a natural fit for community engagement. And a community engagement focus vastly improves funding prospects—not because there is so much money out there for engagement work (there is not) but because of a seldom spoken truth about arts funding. There is a finite universe of potential arts funds. Arts-friendly individuals, foundations, corporations, and government agencies represent a tiny (and, arguably, shrinking) sliver of the funding world. This is why arts organizations are so loath to share donor lists or funding source information. However, when arts organizations begin to expand their focus beyond artcentric programming and address the interests of communities, the range of legitimate funding opportunities expands exponentially.

Governance

Boards are rightly understood as resource generators, although it is a profound mistake to see them as *only* that. Yet even here, money is not the only resource board members bring to the table. Each one has expertise *and* a variety of relationships. Challenging them to assist with building bridges into the many communities of which they are members could, in some cases, be even more valuable than their financial contributions. In addition, if one criteria for board membership were community connections, this might expand the pool of talent beyond the “usual suspects” and provide access to new communities. The respect a board member has in a community could carry over to “benefit of the doubt” for the arts organization, a resource money can’t buy.

Volunteers

Volunteers working directly with the public are ideally positioned to support engagement work. Docents (see Docents as Engagers), box office support, even ushers can be trained to interact with people in a way that supports relationship building processes. Asking questions and reporting back on what is heard can provide valuable insight to support engagement.

While this does not cover all aspects of arts administration, it should be sufficiently illustrative to point the way. (As one more example, altering marketing focus group meetings to become more two-way dialogues is a simple switch that can elicit both the essential marketing information and support relationships between the attendees—and the communities of which they are a part—and the organization.) Again, early work in engagement should begin with a new habit of mind applied to current practices and see where that leads.

Conclusion

The principal point here is that much can be done with little or no change to currently scheduled programming or with little change in approaches to future programming. In addition, much can be done with relatively simple shifts in habits of mind across all departments (simple once those shifts have occurred). The important thing is to begin. Over time, as relationships are built, changes—both modest and more substantive—will (and should) occur, complexity will increase (as will funding opportunities), and the way forward will be clearer (at least a little) to all involved.

*** SAMPLE: XYZ Arts Organization's Commitment to Our Communities**

XYZ Arts, in living out its mission commitment to “[portion of mission statement that supports 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
XYZ Arts
Date*