



CREATE

COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

Embarking on Community Engagement

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.

*** 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