



CREATE

COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

Embarking on Community Engagement

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 at 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.