

Growing Audiences: Creating Value, Meaning & Energy

Introduction

AAR's approach to *Growing Audiences* is based on both *conceptual* and *strategic* elements emerging from the artistic process and described in *Folio One: The Process-Driven Organization*. At the heart of this approach is a commitment to values and shared meanings achieved through learning, strategic behavioral change and generating energy to drive and sustain real change.

For artists and arts providers, the need and desire to make, produce, perform, exhibit, present or write art is equaled only by the need and desire to connect that art with an audience. No artist or arts provider is committed to making work for no one to see. All arts providers want and need people to engage and participate in their artistic process and products in a meaningful way. It follows, then, that the most meaningful relationships artists and arts providers have on every level begin with their audience relationships. It is fair to say that growing a body of work and the resource base and means to support that work is proportionate to the ability to grow the audience. Therefore, key to growing audiences is understanding that increasing and enhancing audience connection must be a whole organizational commitment and process and not an isolated project or activity pursued by marketing or outreach departments alone.

We recognize that there are arts leaders who insist that their only responsibility is to choose the highest quality art and put it on their walls or stages. The logic of this approach is that if there is a large audience, it's because the work is of such high quality - after all, high quality speaks for itself. If there is not an audience, it must be a failure to convey the quality of the work and thus a fault of the marketing director or the outreach director who should have done more to educate people who obviously don't know quality when they see it.

On the other hand, there are arts leaders working from a strong personal and integrated value base who give equal importance to the curatorial functions of choosing and programming art and the process of determining how the art best connects with and affects its audiences. Those working from this value base share many of the same beliefs, such as:

- The arts should be a part of everyone's life.

- The arts provide unique opportunities for learning, growing, understanding, connecting cultures, peacefully co-existing and exchanging ideas.
- The arts can play a positive, transformational role in people's lives.
- The arts provide opportunities for healing and problem solving even as it provides beauty, joy and challenging ideas.

These arts leaders want to have conversations all over the community about their work. And they want to listen to what their organizational partners, audiences and communities care about. They are driven to connect art and people. These arts providers understand that connecting art and audiences is as much a process as making and programming art. They also understand that the two processes are inextricably linked.

So, what does it mean to increase and enhance arts participation? The desire to build audiences is a given, but increasing numbers alone is not enough. It's the quality and richness of the experience and the special sense of surprise, discovery and learning that truly engage audiences. When we refer to increasing and enhancing audiences, we mean: *deepening* involvement by those who already participate in some fashion; *broadening* involvement to include those who, for whatever reasons, participate minimally or not at all; and *diversifying* participation. Diversifying means first: diversifying the experiences of those already engaged so they may experience and enjoy a greater range of arts expression and content; and second: diversifying with the hope of becoming as inclusive and representative of a given community's culture, age, race and ethnicity as appropriate and possible.

We believe that arts participation includes any deliberate, active involvement in art and culture. This is not only fundamental but a core value and working definition. That is, we believe that any purposeful activity, whether attending a performance or taking a writing class, is arts participation. Each and every point of intersection and connection with the arts has value. Consequently, arts participation should include as many points of entry and connection as possible. No value judgment should be placed on any form of deliberate, active participation. Moreover, no one artistic expression or culture is more or less valid than another. We view the range of art and culture possibilities as broad and inclusive of classical, contemporary and folk/ethnic expressions; performances and exhibitions of music, dance, theater, the visual arts and literature. Of course, within this definition, each discipline contains numerous subsets (e.g. "theater" includes mime, puppetry, performance art, etc.), and each subset may be culturally

specific, community-based (rural, urban, neighborhood) or defined by a social, political or gender focus.

The definition also encompasses activities taking place in a diverse array of venues, including community centers, schools, performing arts centers, clubs, bookstores, cafes, churches, theaters, museums, galleries, libraries, community colleges and universities, elder hostels and concert halls. The important thing is not the format, ethnicity or “quality” of the expression or the venue; it is the richness of experience and connection that can be achieved.

A Strategic Framework

Most will agree that the only thing consistent about audience behaviors today is inconsistency and unpredictability. Interpretations of this can range from the impact of the economy to the war on terror to the inevitable result of bad art or bad management. The fact is that predictable audience behaviors either don’t exist at all, or have changed more than our understanding and abilities to address through traditional marketing and research methods.

For example, a common view of this in the field is “subscriptions are declining, ergo, audience attendance must be declining.” *The New York Times* arrives at this conclusion on a fairly regular basis. Yet all available objective data (e.g. Broadway ticket revenues) and informed subjective observation (from our particular vantage point this includes nearly 400 producing non-profit theaters in New York City, more than 300 dance, music and theater groups in Philadelphia, hundreds of exhibiting, producing and presenting arts providers in North Carolina, et al.) suggest that audience attendance, if anything, is growing and diversifying at least in some measured relationship to the growth of producing arts organizations all over the country. It is more likely that our ways of understanding audiences and addressing the complex behavior changes of the last couple of decades has simply not changed as much as the audiences themselves.

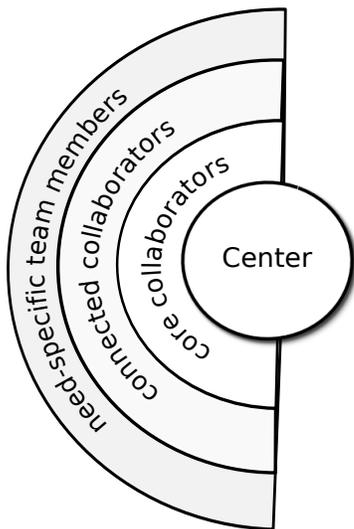
In today’s complex buyer’s market, demographic profiling tells us only a little about who is attending, even less about why they attend, and virtually nothing about how a given audience may have come together, or not. We can learn a great deal more about audiences from the relationships we have with them and by the values, interests and experiences that influence and shape their actions. We can best understand audiences as individuals and groups of individuals responding discretely and specifically to an arts provider and/or to arts content that is meaningful.

A Relational Component

Each arts provider needs to be as clear about external relationships as internal ones. Not all relationships are created equal, nor can they be or should they be. Unquestionably, certain relationships are critical to ongoing stability and viability. Such relationships require appropriate time, attention, respect, communication, cooperation and reciprocity. But other relationships are more transient and function within the time and space of a given project. And some relationships aren't meant to be. *No arts provider can be meaningful to all.* If you attempt to be, you may end up being meaningful to none.

Healthy Artistic Organizational Relationships. We describe organizational relationships in *Folio One: The Process – Driven Organization.* The graphic (figure 1) represents professional staff, artists, producing, presenting, curatorial and programmatic function of an organization. For a more detailed description of these relationships, please refer to Folio One, pages 12 – 14.

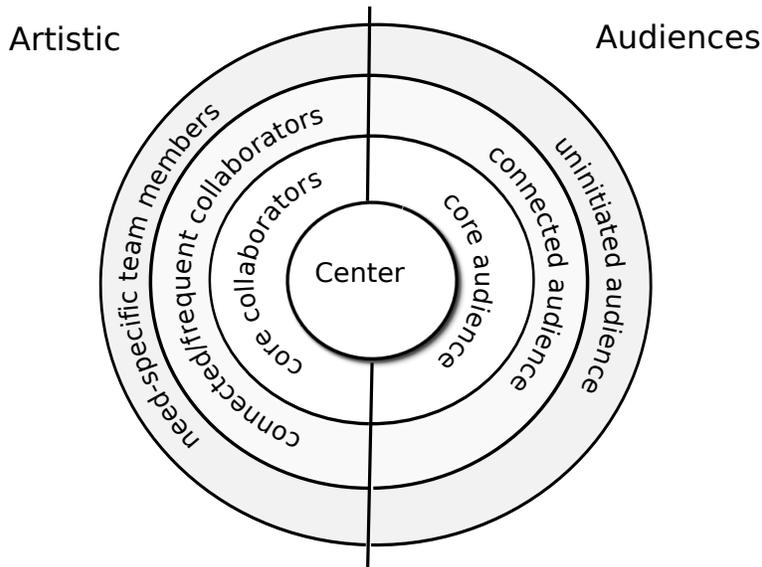
Figure 1: Organizational Artistic Relationships



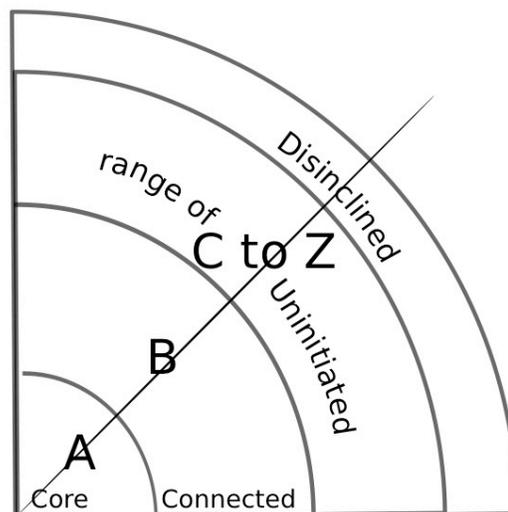
Healthy Audience Relationships. The relationships with audience members must be formed with the same kind of commitment and clarity as artistic/organizational relationships. Again, this approach is not a model; it is a way of describing consistent, coherent, healthy and balanced relationships within the organization. Figure 2, shows how artistic and audience relationships reflect each other.

Just as the artistic aspects of the organization benefit from the strengths of both core collaborators and need-specific team members, so also do the development aspects of the organization benefit from both core supporters and transactional/reciprocal resource relationships.

Figure 2: Organizational Artistic & Audience Relationships



There is no objective body of research or demographic data that can consistently or definitively characterize a given audience in a community or an arts provider's audience at a time and place. But there is a range of relationships that every arts provider has in its community of existing and potential audiences. We characterize these relationships as the *core*, the *connected*, the *uninitiated* and the *disinclined*.



Every arts provider has a *core audience* (**A** in the diagram). The *core* includes those who attend your events on a regular basis because they are personally committed to you, your work, your programming or perhaps your aesthetic or curatorial point of view. They may have a personal commitment to your institution – or some combination of all the above.

The *connected* (**B** in the diagram) are those who attend arts events but aren't necessarily committed to any one arts provider. They shop around and seek out the performances, exhibits, or events that are most meaningful and that they are most likely to enjoy.

For those in the *uninitiated* range (**C** to **Z** in the diagram), arts participation is not an active part of their lives or consciousness – at least as far as we know. It is possible and perhaps likely that they are participating in some cultural activities, but none of which we are readily aware. They are not “anti-art.” Rather, their participation in arts activities as avocation or as an audience member may not be a meaningful part of their lives. They aren't reading ads or reviewing arts calendar announcements; mailers and brochures may be little more than junk mail. But if an arts activity is meaningful enough even *uninitiated* arts participants may become actual arts participants.

Both the *core* and the *connected* are what we consider *inclined* audiences because they are made up of those in the community who participate in arts events and activities. They actively seek participation opportunities and are open to receiving notices and invitations to participate. This participation may include interest and involvement in a specific art form or the arts in general. It may include active participation in an arts activity and/or serial involvement in arts presentations (subscriber, frequent participant or ticket buyer). The *core* and *connected* are best understood in terms of their level and intensity of interest and participation behaviors rather than discrete characteristics or demographics.

Interestingly, when confronted with new, different or unfamiliar work (particularly anything contemporary or non-traditional), inclined audiences – both the *core* and *connected* – can become *uninitiated*. In fact, they often demonstrate the very same characteristics as those who don't attend the arts at all. For example, the most ardent fan of chamber music won't cross over to jazz simply because both feature music performed interactively by a small group of musicians in an intimate setting. The classical ballet audience that flocks to *Swan Lake* will stay away in droves from the contemporary rep season. Staid symphony devotees will actually sit out of the contemporary offering on the program or arrive after it is over. Traditional marketing promotes and

relies on the crossover logic; experience and honest instinct has always told arts professionals otherwise.

The understanding that *all audiences can become uninitiated* is significant to all arts providers, whether it's those attempting to connect audiences interested in the classics with contemporary, non-traditional or particularly challenging arts content or those interested in contemporary work when asked to participate in classical offerings.

A Fourth Range. It is worth noting that in addition to the *core, connected* and the *uninitiated* range of arts participants in each community, there is a fourth range that we refer to as the *disinclined*. The *disinclined* are “anti-art” – or at least they claim to be. They are consciously opposed or averse to the arts and arts participation, usually due to some deeply held philosophical, political or religious beliefs. Some *disinclined* work actively against the arts, individually or organizationally, and they will deny their interest or even incidental involvement with the arts. Developing a meaningful relationship with the *disinclined* is not impossible, but is unlikely.

Conceptual Building Blocks

Both biological and social sciences tell us that in a given community population, change may occur in two ways. One is through deliberate behavior change by individual entities (individuals and organizations) that stimulate and accelerate change within a population by direct engagement and interaction. The other is through community self-referencing behaviors that evolve over time, sometimes only discernible over generations. The *Growing Audiences* process is based on our belief that broad-based change in arts and audience participation must be the result of deliberate behavior change, driven by arts providers in a manner that benefits and is reflected in generations to come.

Integral to deliberate behavior change are some key conceptual building blocks.

It's About Values – and It's Personal. Changing audience and arts participation behaviors stems from each arts provider's commitment to audience and community as a fundamental part of their beliefs and values. And these beliefs and values must be expressed, shared and embraced throughout the entire organization. There's no such thing as organizational values – only the personal values of the leadership and of those within the organization who share them. Ideally, these values are so deeply held and well expressed that they infuse the organization and become

inextricably associated with it. Any change in audience behaviors begins and extends from the arts provider's commitment to creating change within the community by starting within her or his own organization.

Unquestionably, the individual arts provider is the central player in increasing and enhancing – deepening, broadening, diversifying – and accelerating change in arts participation in any community. The range of arts participants – active and potential – in each community is important. Understanding what motivates someone to participate is helpful, but the vital leveraging agent in this intricate equation is the individual arts provider. Interaction between arts provider and arts participant occurs when an arts provider instigates an arts project, activity or opportunity and arts participants respond. The inspiration for a given project or an entire body of work may come from many sources, including the audience. But the consilience – the jumping together – of inspiration and project instigation comes from the arts provider. Even the seemingly most solitary and private act of arts participation, reading a book, only occurs as a result of a complex collaboration of arts providers: the writer putting words to paper, the publisher producing the book, the animateur (parent, teacher, friend, artist, critic) motivating the participant to read the book, a book vendor making it available. An arts provider's ability to affect arts participation behaviors in the community is directly related to her or his own organizational values, behaviors and relationships, for better or worse.

Artistic Vision and Mission – Non-Negotiables. Arts providers expecting to increase and enhance arts participation must maintain a commitment to their artistic vision and mission and to high quality and integrity in the work being provided. Audiences and arts participation cannot be sustained by any set of tools, techniques or process if the work doesn't merit sustained engagement. Certain techniques and clever tricks can get audiences, but cannot keep them. Integral to any high-quality arts experience and connection is work that is interesting, thoughtful, appropriately challenging and provocative, well crafted and displayed – indeed entertaining and satisfying. Not everything succeeds, nor do audiences expect constant success. What they do expect is consistency in integrity and effort or they won't come back, no matter how clever the sales device. As a practical matter, increasing overall audience participation, in both numbers and repetition, is central to the financial well being and ongoing capabilities of each organization, not to mention the mental health of the arts provider. The long-term demands of increasing and enhancing arts participation cannot be sustained unless the arts provider maintains a healthy and balanced economic equation along with vision and programming ideas.

Focus on Meanings. The basis of an audience's connection to an arts activity or experience is *meanings* – any person will participate in an arts activity if the activity or experience is *meaningful*. If anything else is more meaningful, whether playing video games or doing nothing, he will not participate in the arts activity. Today people invest their time, resources and energy in those things that are meaningful personally, culturally or experientially. Consequently our audiences have become so diverse, variegated and complex that assumptions or expectations about a given audience based on outward appearance is no longer useful. Rather, within and across the wide range of audiences, *meanings* (or *that which is meaningful*) are far more significant and telling. Perhaps the biggest change in recent years is that what is meaningful defies, even sometimes contradicts, our traditional ways of categorizing audiences by demographics. Today we can understand more by the way audiences behave in pursuit of or in response to meanings than the way that audience looks.

Viewing arts participants and participation along the lines of meanings requires acknowledging the extraordinary range of diverse characteristics that exists. This range includes age; gender orientation; ethnicity and race; class; geographic location; social, political and occupational interests; and significant experiences of all kinds. In any community the range is quite broad and grows ever more so as time goes on. Likewise, the ways in which an arts activity may be meaningful is quite extensive. There are an almost infinite variety of individuals in each community who identify with certain cultural groups, yet maintain distinct personal interests and experiences. Obviously, programming to a homogenous cohort, or the notion that an audience will respond to anything in tidy groupings, ignores the diversity and variety that exists within each community.

Adopt a Learning Consciousness. Long-term, generational change in arts participation is a function of short term and long-term behavior change. And any arts provider committed to changing the behaviors of those in the community must be prepared to first change her own behavior. This is the basis of the *learning consciousness*. Changing behaviors is a function of learning and conscious effort. By definition, learning is the process of acquiring knowledge, information and experience that changes behavior. And consciousness is the way humans override force of habit and rote responses to chart a different course.

Marketing is a Communication Tool, Not a Strategy for Growing Audience: Over the years, arts professionals have learned a lot about marketing: Sales and advertising; positioning and pricing; packaging and promoting season, single and group tickets; audience research; profiling; projections and analysis; telemarketing; direct mail; fax-sell; e-mail; branding and grandstanding; on and on and on. Most have become expert at "tweaking" existing marketing approaches, manipulating tools and techniques while being ever alert to the newest sales gimmicks. But even when those techniques worked they were (and are) primarily tools for persuasive communication. Marketing reaches only the inclined audiences and is effective only in communicating information not in building genuine relationships based on meaning which are the basis of growing audiences. They have always been ineffective in broadening and diversifying audiences or leading audiences to new and different cultural experiences.

Attracting, engaging and sustaining audiences are undoubtedly some of the most concerning issues for artists and arts professionals. More detailed demographics and new marketing gimmicks have not come close to addressing the complex issues related to real behavioral change and deep relationship building that are necessary to achieve our true goals of growing audiences.

This Folio on Growing Audiences, like all of our Folios, extends into a corresponding AAR Workbook on Growing Audiences. The concepts contained herein, and particularly the Relational Component described above, serve as the basis for a strategic framework, the Relational Landscape Map, which is detailed in the Growing Audiences Workbook. For more information about ARTS Action Research's work, services, publications and team of Associates please check our website at www.artsaction.com.