



Aunt Lydia (Caroline Worra) and the Handmaids in Boston Lyric Opera's production of *The Handmaid's Tale*. Photo by Liza Voll

What can museums learn about attracting new audiences from Boston Lyric Opera?

Summary

Cultivating the Next Generation of Art Lovers: How Boston Lyric Opera Sought to Create Greater Opportunities for Families to Attend Opera is part of a series of case studies commissioned by The Wallace Foundation to explore arts and cultural organizations' evidence-based efforts to reach new audiences and deepen relationships with their existing audiences. Each aspires to capture broadly applicable lessons about what works and what does not—and why—in building audiences. The American Alliance of Museums developed this overview to highlight the relevance of the case study for museums and promote cross-sector learning.

The study tells the story of how one arts organization created opportunities for families to experience their programming in the hopes of engaging future audiences. Boston Lyric Opera's approach to reducing attendance barriers and developing community partnerships is applicable to any museum looking to build new audiences.

Challenge

Opera was facing an uncertain future, popular among only a small niche of Americans that was declining and aging over time. There was little evidence that a broader and—crucially—younger audience was coming to support the next generation of the art form.

Audience Goal

BLO wanted to bring children in to see the opera, thinking that this early exposure could encourage lifelong participation and counteract any negative perceptions about the form early on. They wanted this exposure to come in a format that emphasized the razzle-dazzle of the opera and made it convenient for parents to take them to attend.

Research

From conversations with parents, BLO learned that their biggest barrier was time, since they were busy raising their families. Their concerns included:

- The travel time from suburbs into downtown Boston
- The long length of opera productions
- The need for childcare
- The limited schedule for opera productions, which made them harder to plan around

Strategies

To address these concerns and make it easier for parents to attend with children, BLO decided to launch a series of full-scale operas to be held in different neighborhoods around Greater Boston, with supplementary preview workshops discussing the artform held in libraries and community venues in the neighborhoods. They used the follow tactics:

- Marketing the program to parents who were already fans of opera
- Staging the operas at convenient times and locations, with a more affordable ticket price than main-stage operas
- Finding venues that met the technical and spatial demands of full-scale opera productions, and were also convenient to significant audiences of opera fans
- Promoting to familiar audiences using a combination of direct mail, website promotion, and a formal word-of-mouth campaign among parents
- Promoting to unfamiliar audiences using partnerships with community organizations, direct mail, and a word-of-mouth campaign among local businesses

Results


During the initiative:

- Attendance increased when BLO held more performances, but not always in proportion to the number of performances. The popularity of the opera's source material, the venue's seating capacities, economic conditions, and weather conditions all led to mixed results.
- The performances reached parents who were already fans of opera, and largely came from the high-income white demographic that most patronizes the art form, but did succeed in introducing many of their children to opera for the first time.
- Performances in areas that were already known as strong opera markets, and were dominated by the affluent white demographic, dramatically outperformed those that took place in less affluent or white-dominated areas.
- Few adults at the family performances went on to see mainstage productions, though BLO is hopeful this may change as their children get older and coordination becomes easier.
- The preview workshops held at community venues were well attended, often at capacity for the venues.
- The previews attracted significantly more opera newcomers than the performances themselves, with 56 percent of adults attending saying they had never attended a fully staged opera compared to 12 percent at the performances.
- 59 percent of adults attending the previews said they found them "extremely enjoyable."

Insights

1. Addressing barriers was effective. By staging operas in a more convenient time and place, BLO successfully drew parents who wanted to attend them but could not find the time. If BLO had the resources to explore perceptual barriers, among people who would need to be persuaded to attend opera even if it was convenient, it might have seen greater results.
2. Offering a high level of quality promoted the organization's brand. By refusing to cut corners or treat its family operas as second-class citizens, BLO strengthened its appeal to opera fans and likely impressed first-timers with the spectacle of its offerings.
3. Shaping the performances to the demographic increased the impact. Rather than just excerpting adult operas, BLO created the performances to serve the capacities and proclivities of children, and sought out feedback to make constant tweaks in how they presented them.
4. Committing to constant improvement led to greater success. By evaluating each iteration of the event, drawing on research and observation, the staff made tweaks to the format that helped attendance increase.
5. Public libraries were effective community partners. BLO found they were easy to coordinate with and effective at filling the preview events with local constituents who were eager to introduce their children to new and enriching experiences.
6. Small local venues were better at overcoming perceptual barriers. One reason more newcomers seemed drawn to previews at venues like libraries was that they were familiar with the environment and the conduct associated with it, which might not have been true for more formal performance spaces.
7. Previews effectively conveyed the essence of opera without the bells and whistles. The stripped-down, intimate format made a dent with new audiences who were learning about opera, despite the tradeoffs in grandeur.

Discussion Questions

- What do parents know about your museum? Do you understand why they may not be visiting in larger numbers?
 - Do you have the resources to investigate fully the needs and preferences of your target audience? Do you know the community partners that are most relevant to your target audience?
 - Are your program ideas so ambitious that they're intimidating new audiences? What low-key, less ambitious programs might achieve your goals?
 - Are there potential arrangements you can form with like-minded organizations?
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Additional Resources

The Road to Results: Effective Practices for Building Arts Audiences. Bob Harlow. New York: Wallace Studies in Building Arts Audiences, 2014

This report identifies and examines nine practices of arts organizations that successfully expanded their audiences.

Taking Out the Guesswork: A Guide to Using Research to Build Arts Audiences. Bob Harlow. New York: Wallace Studies in Building Arts Audiences, 2015

This practical guide show arts organizations how to use research to cultivate audiences.

Building Audiences for the Arts Knowledge Center. The Wallace Foundation

This website features reports and other resources for insights into building audiences for the arts.

