



Photo by Jordan Cassway

What can museums learn about attracting new audiences from The Clay Studio?

Summary

Opening New Doors: Hands-on Participation Brings a New Audience to The Clay Studio 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 used research and experimentation to appeal to a new generation of supporters. TCS's approach to learning its new audience in depth, adjusting programming and marketing to serve them, and ensuring that they felt welcome as newcomers is applicable to any museum looking to engage new demographic groups.

Challenge

The Clay Studio had thrived for decades as a haven for ceramics enthusiasts in Philadelphia, offering classes, studios, gallery shows, and a store for buying and selling finished works. But its core base of supporters was stagnating in age and diminishing in number over time, while programs designed to bring in new audiences were not succeeding, making the studio's future uncertain.

Audience Goal

TCS decided to pursue an audience of young professionals between age twenty-five and forty-five who were already culturally active. They wanted a younger group of visitors with an existing affinity for the arts who might become deep supporters in time.

Research

The Clay Studio found early success with the young professional demographic in a beginner's "Date Night" workshop with a social atmosphere and informal instructional style. This fueled ideas among staff that such hands-on experiences could be the key to attracting more visitors. The studio decided to research why the program was so popular and how it could be leveraged to turn more young people into deep supporters.

The studio convened focus groups of young professionals in the city to find out about their cultural habits and how TCS programming and marketing fit into them. They found the following threads:

- The target audience wanted novel experiences different from standard gallery fare, especially in social settings.
- TCS's marketing materials alienated people who were unfamiliar with ceramics or the studio, because they included too much information, used insider language, and buried the experiential aspect of the programming.

- “First Friday” events that brought in many visitors failed to attract them back because they showcased finished ceramics instead of the experience of making them.
- Young professional parents were eager to expose their children to creative activities but were discouraged by the cost of doing so.

Strategies

To address the feedback it received in its research, the studio tried the following tactics:

- Developing new program formats to suit the demographic’s preferences
- Shorter, lower-cost, beginner-friendly classes that made it easier to sample TCS’s programs without making a long-term commitment
- Affordable drop-in classes for parents and children, to accommodate family budgets and schedules
- Free “gateway” experiences with clay for visitors at events like First Fridays, which offered a small preview of what the studio offers in a paid workshop
- Reshaping communications to better reach the demographic
- Reworking marketing materials to be simpler, with more images, less text, and less insider jargon
- Emphasizing the hands-on experience of working with clay with active words and images
- Tailoring messages to different audiences and placing them in outlets and display areas where the audience would see them
- Using email marketing and social media to establish regular communication with different audiences and accommodate young professionals’ habits

Results

In the five-year period studied:

- Enrollment in classes and workshops tripled.
- Revenue from tuition and supplies more than doubled.
- Despite overall fluctuations in memberships, programs for young audiences with social benefits showed promise.

Insights

1. Hands-on introductory experiences stimulated interest. Letting newcomers work directly with clay, without any need for prior skills or long-term commitments, created a gateway to deeper engagement with the organization.
2. Learning the target demographic was essential to serving them. Knowing what preferences drove successes helped make more of them, and encouraged thoughtful experimentation and openness to change.
3. Welcoming newcomers meant reducing intimidation. The studio and its instructors had to learn the difference between expert authority and elitism, to open its knowledge and resources to visitors without alienating them.

Discussion Questions

- What active, unintimidating, and low-commitment gateway experiences could your museum provide to new visitors?
- Are there ways to share or involve visitors in the creative process behind the objects in your museum or the work of exhibiting them?
- Do you know what your audience thinks of your museum's print and online marketing? Have you designed it around what you think is important, or what will be most important or interesting to the people you are trying to attract?
- For potential visitors, who might not have exposure to the subject your museum covers, do you have communications that are free of insider language and highlight emotional or other benefits they can understand?
- How does your audience-building initiative support your museum's mission? How will you measure the initiative to make sure it stays aligned with the mission?

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 shows 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.