Photo by Dominic Mercier.

What can museums learn about attracting new audiences from Fleisher Art Memorial?

Summary

Staying Relevant in a Changing Neighborhood: How Fleisher Art Memorial is Adapting to Shifting Community Demographics 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 attract participants from new demographics in its changing neighborhood. Fleisher's approach to learning its new audience in depth, adjusting programming to serve them, and ensuring that they felt welcome as newcomers is applicable to any museum looking to engage new demographic groups.

Challenge

Fleisher Art Memorial was founded to bring arts education to people from diverse economic and social backgrounds in Southeast Philadelphia, which in the early twentieth century meant European immigrants and their descendants. But by the next century the area was home predominately to immigrants from Latin America and Asia, while participants at on-site Fleisher programs were mostly white and relatively affluent, a particular concern given the founding mission of the organization.

Audience Goal

To engage better with its ethnically diverse community, Fleisher set a goal to have one of every three students in on-site programs come from nearby neighborhoods.

Research

Fleisher conducted demographic studies, interviews with local residents and community leaders, and focus groups with students at the school who lived in the surrounding area. These revealed several common barriers keeping residents from participating:

- Most were unfamiliar with Fleisher or what it offered.

- Many found Fleisher's building, a former church, intimidating and ambiguous, and had no way of knowing what was inside.

- Many who did participate found the atmosphere of the site uninviting and conservative.

- Many could not speak English well or at all, while Fleisher's signs and classes only used English.

- Many did not have the money to pay for tuition and/or supplies.

- Many did not have the flexibility to take children to and from classes, or to arrange childcare to attend adult classes.

- Many did not see Fleisher's programming fitting into their cultural identity, and thought of the organization as not being "for" them.

- Many were uncomfortable with people and institutions outside of their ethnic communities because of the discrimination they faced.

Despite this, the research found that residents widely enjoyed practicing art in the context of their communities, and there was a pressing need for after-school activities for children and daytime activities for parents with young children, which Fleisher could fill if it surmounted the barriers.

Strategies

Fleisher realized it needed more than targeted programming and marketing to overcome the main barriers of familiarity and trust, but rather a sustained presence in the daily lives of residents that established them as bona fide neighbors. They needed to approach residents directly, provide clear information about what they offered and how to access it, and create a welcoming atmosphere for people who came from different cultures and did not always speak English.

To accomplish this, they:

- Reinvented their internal culture to be more welcoming

  - Creating a paid Visitor Services department to provide accommodating front-line service

  - Training all staff extensively in cultural competency and community engagement strategies

  - Visiting neighborhood gathering places with all staff, to meet community residents and experience their everyday lives

  - Briefing staff on plans, allowing them to voice their concerns and plan solutions in the process

- Established connections in the community

  - Building or strengthening relationships with organizations for underrepresented and newly arrived residents

  - Designing programs to bring Fleisher activities out into the community

    - Inviting local performers and businesses representing various ethnic groups to participate in Fleisher's street festival, drawing more community members to visit

    - Creating "ColorWheels" van to deploy at public spaces and events, fully equipped with supplies for a variety of one-off and ongoing art workshops

    - Hiring local residents to tell people about programs and help them register, report to Fleisher on neighborhood events and partnership opportunities, and help develop culturally specific programming

- ◆ Made changes to on-site operations
    - ○ Revising course catalog to be shorter, in simpler language, and easier to scan for information on schedule and fees
    - ○ Developing a program to provide tuition assistance
    - ○ Adding bilingual and culturally specific classes with broad appeal

Results

By the end of the four-year period studied:

- Significantly more survey respondents said Fleisher seemed interested in serving local residents, immigrants, and non-English speakers.
- Local enrollment in on-site classes climbed from 20 to 24 percent.
- Local youth enrollment rose from 25 to 36 percent.
- Local adult enrollment grew in number, from 428 to 596, but stayed flat in percentage.
- The mix of ethnicities in enrollment stayed about the same, though Asian enrollment declined for unknown reasons.
- Staff have come to see the process as more gradual than they first expected, and believe real change will come from consistent commitment over a period of years.

Insights

1. The founding mission was an advantage. Because Fleisher was explicitly created to do what the initiative aimed, there was little resistance among staff and leadership, and little question that it was worth the resources it took.

2. Change had to start from the inside. Fleisher invested in extensive training that taught staff how to welcome the people they hoped to serve, which also helped unify the organization under the larger goal.

3. Engaging the community meant engaging with the community. Going into the neighborhoods and establishing themselves as an enthusiastic participant in goings-on became the core of Fleisher's strategy.

4. Partnerships with community organizations were a give-and-take. Fleisher built good will by listening to partners and responding to their needs and limitations.

5. Visitor experiences had to match in all settings. If Fleisher welcomed or appealed to certain groups in one setting, like an off-site program, they needed to make sure it did the same in another, like registering for an on-site class. Otherwise the inconsistency would hamper progress and turn away interested people.

6. Providing multiple points of entry gave more people a chance to participate. A variety of activities, with commitments ranging from one-off workshops in a local park to ten-week classes on-site, exposed Fleisher's programming to as many people as possible, all of which might draw them in for more over time.

7. Embracing data helped refine strategy. By first collecting information on what was happening to the area's demographics and what the priorities of the new residents were, Fleisher was able to base its initiatives on solid information rather than assumptions.

Discussion Questions

- How does attracting new audiences tie into your museum's mission statement? Would serving new visitors change the nature of the museum or reinforce it?

- What first impression is your museum giving off? Is the building ambiguous to passerby, or would they know what was inside? If they came inside, who or what would they first see? Would they feel welcomed?

- Is your staff ready to welcome people from multiple ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds? Have they had training in this? How could they improve this competency?

- How involved is your museum in its community? Does it participate in off-site activities? Does it partner with local organizations? What are some opportunities to do that?

- Have you accounted for language barriers? Would a person who did not speak English well or at all be able to research, navigate, and engage with the content of your museum?

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.