



Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum. Photo by Steve Osemwenkhae.

What can museums learn about attracting new audiences from Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum?

Summary

More Than Just a Party: How the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum Boosted Participation by Young Adults 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 museum attracted a young adult audience to engage with its collection. Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum's approach to adapting to its new audience while staying true to its mission is applicable to any museum looking to build new audiences.

Challenge

Like many museums and cultural organizations, Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum's staff were alarmed by data showing declining attendance among younger audiences. Their future rested on engaging this demographic, which would require a change in strategy, but they were also beholden to the precise and restrictive mission of the museum's founder, which dictated how the collection was displayed and what experience was to be emphasized.

Audience Goal

The Gardner wanted to attract young adults, age eighteen to thirty-four, with a social public program that got them to engage deeply with the art.

Research

The Gardner began by putting control of the program into the hands of museum staff who were members of the eighteen-to-thirty-four demographic, allowing them to draw on their own experiences and those of their friends. They combined this brainstorming with market research and came up with a few key ideas:

- The event needed to be at night, directly after most people would be getting out of work.
- The museum needed to find a way to break down perceptions that it was old-fashioned, and that visitors without expertise in art would be bored or intimidated.
- The event needed to offer not only live music and DJs but beer and wine as well, despite concerns that serving alcohol could endanger the collection.
- The event needed to include programming that actively encouraged participants to engage with the art, or else they might not be motivated to explore the galleries at all.

- Participants hoped to meet new people at the event, not only socialize with their existing friends.

Strategies

The Gardner's plan for the events was threefold:

- Programming that broke down barriers of expertise and encouraged an open dialogue on the art
 - ◆ Fifteen-minute "Viewfinder talks" led by young volunteers with open-ended questions for participants to respond to
 - ◆ Gallery games, similar to a scavenger hunt, that stimulated critical thinking about the art and required groups to interact with one another
 - ◆ Live music performances
 - ◆ Group sketching stations
 - ◆ Staff-led gallery talks
- Increasing staff to handle program needs, including a part-time assistant on staff, a selection of volunteers from the museum's general pool, and a new volunteer group called "After Hours Ambassadors" consisting of past attendees to the event who are themselves young adults.
- A three-pronged marketing campaign, including promotional materials with an edgier and bolder style than normal Gardner promotions, a multi-channel traditional campaign aimed at the target audience, and an experimental mix of street team and social media outreach activities.

Results

Over the period studied:

- Attendance rose steadily with every year, from an average of around 500 visitors per event in the first year to an average of 670 in the third year.
- 72 percent of visitors in the demographic said they were "extremely likely to recommend" to the program to a friend.
- 78 percent of visitors in the demographic said the program made them "more interested" in visiting the museum during regular hours
- Repeat visitors climbed from 12 percent to 25 percent in the first two years.

- The program recruited 241 new members for the museum, 235 of whom signed up in-person at the event.
- The vast majority of participants, 89 to 93 percent in the years surveyed, explored the galleries during the event, with 52 percent saying it was the activity they enjoyed the most.
- The evening events have drawn a younger and more local crowd than daytime visitors, succeeding in the Gardner's goal.

Insights

1. Removing practical and perceptual barriers brought people in. Creating an easy opportunity to visit the museum in the time best for the audience, and dispelling any idea that the museum was old-fashioned or elitist with edgy marketing and engaging programming, had a clear impact.
2. The museum's limitations were actually advantages. Because it was so important to the Gardner not to stray from the founder's vision, the event stayed true to the core of the organization and felt authentic to attendees, which made it stand out from more pandering attempts.
3. Including the target demographic in planning and staffing the event was important. Upper management trusted their younger staff to draw on their own experiences and direct resources accordingly, which led to effective out-of-the-box thinking, and staffing the event with young volunteers broke down barriers between the museum and attendees.
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.

Discussion Questions

- How can your museum create a novel, refreshing experience for young adults using the assets and resources it has? How can you make sure to keep that experience fresh over time?
- Do you have the leeway to experiment with programs as they develop, bolstering successes and phasing out failures?
- Does your museum have the resources to fund a marketing and research campaign to build awareness among your target demographic, or can it secure them?
- Do you have an adequate understanding of your target demographic, and are you willing to listen to people on the staff or in the public who most understand the demographic?
- Is there any way for your museum to tap into networks of your demographic, or partner with an organization that can?
- Is there any way to reach out to members of the demographic who are passionate about your museum and could be engaged as volunteers?

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.

