



The famous Brindisi in Minnesota Opera's production of *La Traviata*. Photo by Dan Norman

What can museums learn about attracting new audiences from Minnesota Opera?

Summary

Someone Who Speaks Their Language: How a Nontraditional Partner Brought New Audiences to Minnesota 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 brought thousands of new visitors to its programs by partnering with an unconventional spokesperson. Minnesota Opera's approach to reaching new audiences with messages that spoke to their interests is applicable to any museum looking to build new audiences.

Challenge

Like many organizations dedicated to traditional art forms, Minnesota Opera's audience was "graying," with patrons over sixty making up about half of its audience. While this older audience was loyal, and existing programs for young audiences showed promise, there was a gap for middle-aged people in between the ends of this spectrum.

Audience Goal

The Opera decided to reach out to women between the ages of thirty-five and sixty, because this demographic showed unactualized potential in attendance data. They wanted to bust stereotypes that opera is a stagnant and irrelevant art form.

Research

The Opera conducted research and consulted relevant studies from other organizations before the initiative began, and found that:

- Cost is a big barrier to participation.
- Perceptual barriers about opera, that it requires specialized knowledge to understand and will make newcomers feel like outsiders, are steep.
- Most opera fans are introduced to the art form through family and friends, and commonly come into their appreciation through childhood exposure, repeat invitations, or exposure to related art forms like theatre and orchestra.

Strategies

The Opera discovered its strategy serendipitously, when a local talk radio show dedicated to celebrity and entertainment news approached them to do an on-air performance. The Opera asked if one of the hosts, a lifelong opera fan, could also offer listeners free tickets to a show that was selling poorly, and found that his down-to-earth description of the opera's appeal drove uncommon interest, particularly with the middle-aged women demographic. Seeing glimmers of their audience goal in this interaction, the Opera decided to pursue a more formalized partnership with the show's host. The elements of this partnership were:

- Daily live endorsements leading up to and during the performance run of every opera production, emphasizing universal aspects like dramatic storylines and visual spectacle
- Prerecorded commercials for every production and each new season, to play during other shows on the station
- Weekly free ticket giveaways to performances with low attendance
- Weekly pre-performance talks at Minnesota Opera hosted by the radio spokesperson, conducted in a lighthearted tone ideal for newcomers
- On-air interviews with opera singers focusing on lighthearted topics rather than inside information about their careers
- Ticket giveaways to studio audience of "sister" TV network's local talk show, with on-air segments including performances and interviews with opera singers
- A gradual marketing sequence for recipients of ticket giveaways, systematically offering them decreasing discounts on tickets and subscriptions until they became full patrons

Results

Over the four-year period studied:

- High rates of people who received free tickets from the radio show redeemed them, while low rates of the TV audiences did, possibly because radio listeners had to ask for the tickets and because the radio host was more frequent and engaged in promoting the opera.
- 48 percent of newcomers who received free tickets returned to the opera, with 18 percent of those paying for tickets in some capacity, and 11 percent paying for full price tickets or subscriptions.
- Women between thirty-five and sixty increased from 16 percent to 22 percent of the Opera's patron database. Single-ticket sales to the demographic have more than doubled since the initiative began.
- In research conducted with the demographic, those familiar with the radio host considered more of an advocate for the Opera and found him more relatable than other radio hosts who discussed the Opera's performances.

Insights

1. Using a relatable, trusted endorser made a big impact. In focus groups, recipients said hearing a “regular guy” whose opinions they trusted effuse about the opera and assure them they would enjoy it motivated them to attend, a difference felt in the disparity with the TV show’s audience.
2. Converting giveaway recipients to ticket buyers was slow-going. Though the gateway experience did quickly erode some negative stereotypes about the art form, relatively few were motivated to buy tickets, even at a steep discount.
3. New audiences needed help knowing what they wanted. With unfamiliar material, potential visitors might not know how to distinguish between options and choose the one best for them. The Opera experimented with ways to help people connect to good entryways and establish their preferences.
4. Free tickets created psychological barriers. Consumer research shows that it’s hard for people to consider paying for something they once got for free, no matter how discounted it may be. Still, the Opera considered it worthwhile to offer the free tickets because they were so successful in address the perceptual barriers to attending.
5. New audiences spoke a different language. While the Opera was used to marketing its productions with information about composers and historical contexts, people unfamiliar with opera were much more interested in knowing about storylines. Staff had to strike a balance in speaking to this audience and serving its longtime patrons.

Discussion Questions

- Is your museum able to commit to a long-term and potentially costly process of courting new audiences, including incentives like discounts and promotions?
- How can your museum relate its exhibitions to things new audiences are already comfortable and familiar with? Is the whole organization prepared to use an approachable tone in communicating with these audiences?
- How can you help new audiences unfamiliar with the content in your museum choose between the options on display? How might you simplify their decision-making and connect them to the things they will most enjoy?
- Are there local personalities with broad reach and an interest in the topics your museum covers who might make good, cost-effective ambassadors?
- Is there any way for your museum to create an online community where audiences can review and share tips that will help newcomers make decisions?

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.

