



Pacific Northwest Ballet company dancers in Kent Stowell's *Swan Lake*. Photo © Angela Sterling.

# What can museums learn about attracting new audiences from Pacific Northwest Ballet?

## Summary

Getting Past “It’s Not For People Like Us”: Pacific Northwest Ballet Builds a Following with Teens and 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 arts organization used research and experimentation to bring thousands of teens and young adults to its programming. Pacific Northwest Ballet’s approach to learning its new audience, adjusting marketing and programming to fit their interests, and making sure they felt welcome as newcomers is applicable to any museum looking to build new audiences.

## Challenge

Across the country, young people were attending traditional art forms like ballet less and less, putting the future of all organizations dedicated to them in jeopardy. Pacific Northwest Ballet’s new director had a priority of reversing this trend.

## Audience Goal

To make teens see PNB and ballet in general as relevant to their lives, and build a future generation of supporters for the organization.

## Research

PNB conducted focus groups with teens and young adults to explore their perceptions of the company and how its website and advertising contributed to them. Four themes emerged among young audiences in the research:

- They were unfamiliar with ballet and concerned they wouldn’t be able to follow a performance without inside knowledge.
- They expected ballet to be formal, boring, and stuffy.
- They found PNB’s advertising boring, elitist, and lacking in information on pricing and scheduling. They preferred advertising featuring bright colors and dancers with emotional expressions.
- They found PNB’s website dull and were disappointed by the lack of photos and videos to give a sense of what performances were like.

## Strategies

Based on these findings, PNB tried the following strategies:

- Redesigning the website with easy-to-access information about the company, its artists, its school, and its repertory, as well as more convenient ticket purchasing and other added functionality
- Creating videos showcasing PNB's professional dancers and dance students, to introduce people to ballet and the company
- Revising the brand identity for website and advertising to be more inviting: bright colors, emotional images, and approachable language
- Hosting a teens-only preview of PNB's annual choreographers showcase where attendees could interact with choreographers, dancers, and each other
- Taking extra care to welcome teens and young adults to performances and emphasize their value to the ballet
- Communicating to younger audiences through immersive social media content, email marketing, and direct mail

## Results

Over the four-year period studied:

- After the redesign, more website visitors across age groups reported that the site fit their impressions of PNB and that pictures told them what to expect from performances. They also said they had more fun on the site, found the design more eye-catching, and were more satisfied by the multimedia offered.
- The website attracted more visitors and compelled them to stay longer, with unique visitors and pages per visit both increasing significantly.
- About 60 percent of single tickets to performances are now purchased on the website, and a "suggested donation" feature on the checkout has brought in up to \$41,419 in yearly revenue.
- Low-price ticket options have seen sales increases of 238 percent for teens and 20 percent for young adults.
- 60 percent more teens and young adults returned more than once in a season, though season subscription packages targeted at them have not sold well.

## Insights

1. Showing the audience they belonged made a difference. By increasing access with low ticket prices, crafting appealing communications, and working hard to create a welcoming atmosphere in the performance hall, PNB proved they were serious about welcoming younger visitors.
2. Digital media helped the audience build familiarity. Familiarity with the art form, artists, performance material, and organization drove ticket sales, and digital media exploring these topics helped create it.
3. Image mattered. A more dynamic and inclusive visual brand identity for the overall organization built enthusiasm better than marketing that focused on individual programs or seasons.
4. The marketing had to align with the artistic vision. While lively advertising can have a powerful impact, it's important that it does not contradict the organization's overall vision or set visitors up with unrealistic expectations of the experience.

## Discussion Questions

- How hard is it for new audiences to get to know your museum? How could you help them get to know it better?
- Is your brand welcoming to new audiences? How would audiences unsure they could understand the exhibitions in your museum react to your website and communications?
- Are there any existing communities for young people in your museum's area that you could tap into? If not, how could the museum help build one and plant seeds for the future of the organization?
- What untested assumptions does your museum make about new audiences? How could you test these assumptions to see if they are really true?
- What gestures can your museum make to newcomers to show they are welcome and have a place there?

## 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.*