



San Francisco Girls Chorus. Photo by Ben La

What can museums learn about attracting new audiences from San Francisco Girls Chorus?

Summary

Attracting an Elusive Audience: How the San Francisco Girls Chorus is Breaking Down Stereotypes and Generating Interest Among Classical Music Patrons 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 pursued better recognition and attendance from local classical music fans. San Francisco Girls Chorus's approach to researching its audience, making adjustments to suit them, and navigating the transition with transparency and collaboration is applicable to any museum looking to build new audiences.

Challenge

Despite high-profile appearances and accolades, including Grammy Awards and a performance at Barack Obama's inauguration, San Francisco Girls Chorus was struggling to attract an audience for its local concerts beyond friends and family of the performers.

Audience Goal

SFGC wanted to build recognition and attendance among San Francisco's large audience of classical music fans and assert the artistic excellence of its performances.

Research

SFGC conducted focus groups with San Francisco classical music patrons to understand their attitudes toward choral music, awareness and perceptions of SFGC, and responses to SFGC's marketing materials. There were three key findings:

- Participants were not generally aware of girls choruses, despite knowing many adult and boys choruses, and had low expectations of their performance standards.
- Participants assumed SFGC's concerts would be amateurish, boring, overly structured, and held in small unprofessional venues. The marketing materials reinforced these assumptions by showing the singers as one uniform unit, which made them look more like a school group than a professional chorus.
- Participants said they would be motivated to attend by artistic excellence and variation, performances at respected venues, and a strong brand identity that communicated sophistication.

Strategies

SFGC came up with a four-step plan to address these findings:

- Rebranding marketing materials to connote artistic excellence, with images of classical female statuary and close-up photographs of emotive performers
- Deploying a targeted marketing campaign, including direct mailing to patrons of related organizations and radio and television advertising spots
- Limiting most performances to established venues, and following a protocol to create a professional visitor experience at unestablished venues
- Highlighting the dynamic and ambitious aspects of SFGC's programming in the arrangement of performances and in communications

Results

Over the two-year period studied:

- The percentage of classical musical patrons attending performances increased, from 18 percent at baseline to 28 percent and 23 percent in the two years following the rebranding.
- Overall attendance stayed about flat.
- Repeat visitors fell in the second year, meaning many first-time visitors after the rebranding did not return.
- The rebranding had a far-reaching impact on the organization, emphasizing performance over all other aspects of SFGC and sparking changes in the chorus's board composition and fieldwide reputation.

Insights

1. Pinpointing perceptual barriers refined strategy. By using research to identify clearly what the audience did not find appealing, SFGC was able to establish concrete steps it could take to correct those things.
2. Research aided decision-making. By identifying the goal and some areas of concern around it beforehand, SFGC made its research count and took guesswork out of the process.
3. Refocusing the mission aligned expectations. While SFGC had been losing its primary dedication to performance, shifting it back made the brand clearer and unified the organization under a common goal.
4. Transparency and collaboration got the whole team on board. While audience research initiatives can ruffle staff and make them feel undermined, the director's transparency about her goals and openness to collaborating in the process mitigated this possibility at SFGC.

Discussion Questions

- If your museum is contemplating a rebranding, are you prepared for a transformational process that could span several years? Do you have the timeline, patience, and resources?
- How large is the audience for the type of content you are presenting at your museum? What specific perceptions does that audience hold about your museum and its type?
- What do you need to know and what research do you need to conduct to attract new audiences and convert them to repeat visitors?
- Beyond revising your marketing and communications, what other changes would your museum need to make as part of a rebranding initiative?
- Can you count on the whole scope of your museum—including staff departments, leadership, and board members—to support a rebranding and reprioritization if necessary? How can you create an atmosphere of transparency and collaboration to aid this?

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.