



Photo by Sean Airhart.

What can museums learn about digital strategy from Seattle Opera?

Summary

Extending Reach with Technology: Seattle Opera's Multipronged Experiment to Deepen Relationships and Reach New Audiences 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 explore digital solutions for building engagement. Seattle Opera's approach to systematically testing strategies, evaluating them with data, and finding lessons in the results is applicable to any museum looking to deepen engagement from its existing audience and attract newcomers.

Challenge

Sensing a shift in how the public interacted with cultural organizations in the digital age, Seattle Opera wanted to get ahead and avoid losing relevance. But the landscape of digital media and how best to use it still felt like an open question, so it was hard to know where to start and what was worth trying.

Audience Goal

The Opera's long-term objective was to make effective technology-based engagement practices a part of its ongoing practices.

Research

Seattle Opera began by assembling a task force combining staff and board members with technology experts from local companies, to identify what digital tactics were available in the emerging landscape and which of them were most feasible. The task force concluded that the three most promising applications for the Opera's mission would be to:

- Create virtual communities where audience members could interact with the company and each other
- Provide opportunities for people to learn more about opera and Seattle Opera productions
- Make opera more accessible outside the opera hall

With these recommendations in hand, Opera staff conducted email surveys and focus groups of patrons to determine what digital tactics might have the most impact with their audience. From the responses, they discovered that:

- Most were interested in behind-the-scenes content following the making of an opera.
- Videos were a popular idea with the respondents, and YouTube was in widespread use.
- About 35 percent of the respondents listened to podcasts, and there was little interest in them outside of this group.
- About 25 percent of the respondents read blogs weekly, though only 6 percent left comments on them.
- Participatory ideas like audience reviews and caption contests were less interesting to the respondents.

Strategies

The Opera designed three phases of its initiative to deploy over the four years, each designed to build on the results of the last. The phases were: “Storytelling through Technology” (Year 1), “Community Connections through Technology” (Year 2), and “Exploring Place through Technology,” (Year 3-4). The strategies tested over the course of these phases included:


- Behind-the-scenes video series released in the lead-up to performances
- Blog content on the Opera’s website leading up to and during the run of performances, including behind-the-scenes updates and introductions to the operas, also published to social media
- Podcast previewing the content of upcoming operas
- Simulcast of a live opera held in a sports arena
- Interactive strategies like a “Caption of the Day” contest and a “Share and Review” program for visitors to review operas
- Backstage video feed of set and costume changes between acts, shown during intermissions of live performances
- Partnerships with community groups on in-person events related to performances, also streamed online
- Touchscreen tables in the opera hall which let audience members explore archival images of Seattle Opera’s history
- Kindle and iPad editions of educational Spotlight Guides issued for each production
- Radio simulcast of post-performance Q&As
- Arranging for social media influencers to cover events and drive online engagement

Results

At the end of each phase, Seattle Opera conducted audience evaluation surveys to assess the popularity and impact of its strategies. The findings included:

- Behind-the-scenes content was the most impactful throughout the initiative, with a majority of users saying it enhanced their experience of attending the opera. Video was the most popular medium and became central to the initiative over time.
- Blog content was moderately popular, and about half said it enhanced their experience, particularly when it provided context for the work and its themes.
- Interactive strategies were not popular and had little impact with those who used them, and so were abandoned early on.
- Pre-performance podcasts were not widely used and were seen as less interesting than videos.
- Social media was little used, with only 10 percent of attendees saying they followed the Opera's Facebook and 3 percent saying they followed its Twitter. However, these results were on par with the general popularity of social media at the time.
- In-person events were more popular with longtime patrons than newer ones. Streams were lower than expected, though on par with the industry standard.
- The simulcast attracted a younger, more varied audience than the Opera's average, many of them new to opera itself and drawn by the chance to see something "unique and interesting" for free. About half said they would be interested in seeing a future production at the opera house.

Insights

1. Openness to learning was an asset. By adopting a methodical approach, treating each use of technology as an experiment and collecting data on its effectiveness, the Opera remained nimble throughout its initiative and saw better results over time.
 2. Consulting the broader organization early on was key. Fielding concerns about digital content early in the process helped avoid barriers down the road, and involving staff in planning helped uncover the best stories to tell.
 3. The right uses of technology were specific to the organization. Asking what tools were likely to be accessed, by whom, and with what impact helped the Opera choose wisely.
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Discussion Questions

- Are there interesting activities behind the scenes of your museum that the public might be interested in? How can you share them?
- Is your museum's staff willing to try experimental ideas, and prepared to learn from them? What methods do you use to evaluate new strategies?
- How might digital content work for your audience, or the audience you want to pursue? How can you solicit feedback from the audience on what content they would like?

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 a

