6 OVATION-WORTHY WAYS TO ATTRACT NEW AUDIENCES

How theatres and performing arts centres are overcoming modern challenges to attracting patrons, donors, members, and subscribers.
Passion, Purpose, and People

Your performing arts centre is much more than a big stage and a breathtaking lobby. Your events and educational programs add colour to your community, incite civic pride and inspire new ways of thinking. For just a few moments, diverse audiences escape from everyday chaos and indulge in moving, memorable, magical experiences. Constituents who are passionate about the arts have a worthy cause in which to invest.

And while fostering creative arts awareness and education is your primary mission, enabling these efforts through proper funding is certainly high up there on the priority list. It takes scores of patrons, donors, members and subscribers to keep the stages lit and programs rolling year after year.
New Antagonists Emerging

While theatres and performing arts centres are typically great at keeping performances and programs on trend, several challenges have emerged over the past few years that directly threaten the ability for arts venues to attract new patrons, donors, members and subscribers. Some common concerns for the modern venue include:

- The rise of new generations who view the arts differently than prior generations
- Patrons who are less inclined to attend unfamiliar shows, holding out for the big titles
- Changing attention spans as a result of technology, social media and the Internet
- Other education or entertainment options competing locally
- Affordability concerns in communities with diverse social classes
- Internal venue challenges, like lack of time to focus on relationship building
Cue the Solutions

Fear not! Several ways of combating these emerging challenges have surfaced and are currently being utilised by savvy theatres and performing arts centres. There’s no single scripted solution for all venues, but read on for a few tips you could act on to see what works for you.
Understand What Your Target Audience Wants

When it comes to uncovering new ways to engage your target audience, research is key. Give audience insights centre stage by conducting comprehensive research and developing action plans based on your findings. Qualitative research like focus groups and one-on-one interviews with open-ended responses can lead to incredible discoveries about key targets, while quantitative research like surveys can offer access to many more respondents and actionable mass data.
One example of an arts organisation successfully benefiting from research is provided by Bob Harlow, author of *Taking Out the Guesswork: A Guide to Using Research to Build Arts Audiences*, who delivered a keynote address at the US Arts Reach conference. In one example Harlow provided, he discussed how the Pacific Northwest Ballet (PNB) in Seattle wanted to encourage teens and young adults to attend ballet performances.

Their research insights helped them learn that this audience demographic stays away from PNB because they don’t think they’d be able to understand ballet, didn’t feel welcome at PNB, and only goes to performances when they know the performers or can learn about them online – and PNB or the performers were considered hard to get to know.

PNB used these insights and built out strategic programs to specifically counter these issues. They helped this audience get to know them better by creating “Teen Night” where attendees could preview a new choreographer showcase before anyone else in the area at a lower-than-normal price ($10). To add social media depth to the experience, PNB had an employee take behind-the-scenes videos of the showcase and put them on social media sites, which garnered lots of views and engagement. In order to communicate approachability, PNB modified the type of images they use in marketing materials to make the performers appear more likable and approachable. PNB also gave the teen and young adult audience a better look at what they do everyday by partnering with popular local bloggers from TeenTix and setting up workshops to help these bloggers learn how to write ballet critiques.

As a result, PNB more than doubled ticket sales from this target audience in just 4 years and increased sustained participation (more than one performance per season) by 55%, all while attendance of arts events by people ages 18-24 were down 4% nationally during the same period.
Appeal to different generations

Take a look at your event and performance audiences. Do they all generally appear to have the same characteristics? Perhaps it’s time to branch out if you want to secure future patrons and donors.

As core performing arts attendees age, many venues looking to attract new audiences and secure a better outlook for their future find themselves trying to appeal to the younger Generation X and Millennial demographics. In general, these generations tend to appreciate technology, social responsibility and diversity, and have a lot of distractions and entertainment options vying for their attention. When it comes to Millennials, they often claim financial barriers to participating in arts activities, while Gen X-ers who are busy raising children may not find it practical to arrange for a night out at the local theatre.

Performing arts centres are infusing a whole lot of creativity into events, membership programs and educational offerings in order to appeal to Millennials and Gen X-ers. One approach that appears to be working for arts organisations is to attract younger audiences with compressed formats that accommodate their shorter attention spans. Arts organisations are also taking on more contemporary issues and causes that to resonate with this demographic, attempting to hook them by simultaneously exposing them to broader exhibits or offerings.

According to the Detroit Symphony Orchestra (DSO), appealing to younger generations comes down to comfort and relatability. For example, the DSO engages millennials by hosting meet-and-greets with music directors and backstage brews, where they can mingle with musicians. Or, to provide more relatable programming, they will play a film on a giant screen while the DSO plays the score. The DSO also created discount programs for younger generations. Source
Mandurah Performing Arts Centre in Western Australia, formed Riptide Youth Performance Company, in 2012. Riptide was founded to grow the artistic and creative skills of passionate young people aged from 15 – 25 from the local community. The company and program has developed significantly since 2015 with a focus on empowering its young members to participate and lead the creation of original, innovative and playful new performances.

Riptide facilitates a multi-faceted artistic development program each year that includes workshops and masterclasses (designed to give the young members exposure to different styles of performance and performance making) and performance creation (each work is original and either led by the Riptide company themselves or professional artists). The only prerequisite for joining the company is passion and commitment, as opposed to an audition process. Through this inclusive approach, Riptide continues to successfully enable Mandurah’s young and emerging artists the opportunity and freedom to express their creativity, develop their skills and explore their ideas, with the additional benefit of improving the confidence of its members. Source

Off-Center, an offshoot of the Denver Center Theatre Company, offers a less traditional, more accessible night out for young audiences. Attendees receive 3-D glasses as well as free popcorn and beer, and enjoy interactive improv shows. Source

In an example of engaging younger audiences who want to back social causes, Chicago’s Goodman Theatre gives young professionals the opportunity to “make a dramatic impact” by joining their Scenemakers Board. The group holds fundraisers that enable community youth to attend theatrical summer camps. In return for the favour of their support, board members receive exclusive access to engage with play actors and directors as well as participation in a host of soirées. Source

Lack of child care has been cited by parents from these generations as a reason for not attending plays more often. Some arts organisations have explored the addition of child programs that run simultaneously with performances to allow parents the ability to overcome this barrier. Source
Get Technical

Some of the savvier performing arts centres are interweaving technology as a way of appealing to broader audiences. Technology can be broken into two categories here: external technology used to engage with audiences, and internal technology used by the organisation to manage the details so employees have more time to build personal relationships with customers and members.

External technology like websites, apps and devices are especially relevant for the aforementioned younger generations who check their phones more than 150 times a day. Source

In an example of incorporating external technology, the Boston Symphony Orchestra has launched “Casual Fridays,” an initiative to make performances more affordable and accessible, specifically to the next generation of attendees. Concert-goers are encouraged to wear their favourite casual attire to the Symphony Hall, and BSO provides 110 iPads to be used by patrons seated in a designated section at the rear of the orchestra floor, giving them access to digital content that enhances the concert experience. Source
When it comes to behind-the-scenes, internal technology, the best theatre management systems give employees better insights into customer behaviour, keep all of the data and details in line, and streamline workflows so more time can be spent on nurturing patron, donor, member and subscriber relationships.

Such software ideally covers multiple facets of operations, including booking, event communication, accounting and reporting. A platform that combines all event and venue management tasks into a single, end-to-end system can provide ultimate efficiency, reduce costly mistakes, and free your team up to pursue their true passion for the arts. Since all performing arts centres are unique, look for flexible software that allows you to use familiar language and tailor the system to your workflow. Source
**Hold Unique Events**

Many performing arts organisations have found that holding unconventional events is a great way to shake things up and reach a broader audience, especially when it results in social media buzz and media coverage.

Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in San Francisco is one such venue that has found a lot of success in holding unique events that are contextual in nature. For example, as part of its “all access membership,” YBCA holds a book club where participants can come and hear from writers who facilitate the meetings. Or, when it comes to contemporary art—which isn’t always the most obvious or accessible—YBCA will bring in a local artist to put things in context. Attendees appreciate the friendly, casual nature as well as the opportunity to make new friends and participate in a community-building experience.

YBCA further draws new audiences through the “50 Cent Tabernacle,” a series of open, mixed-level dance classes with some of the Bay Area’s foremost masters of dance and movement. These dance classes are only 50 cents to attend and always coincide with the theme of a performance going on that night, such as hip hop or jazz. It gives people the opportunity to come in on a Saturday morning, have a fun, extended experience in the space, and learn more about that evening’s performance.

In addition, YBCA hosts a “Live Practice” on the third Thursday evening of every month, which includes a free gallery admission, extended hours and live programming. A local artist is invited in to take over the grand lobby and entertain the public for two hours. The live performance serves as a great draw for new people to come in the door and browse the gallery while they’re there.
The St. Louis Symphony Orchestra (SLSO) has also found a few interesting ways to gain exposure to broader audiences. Rather than try to draw people into their normal Powell Hall venue, they take their music to the people via a free concert in St. Louis’ expansive Forest Park. Attendees are encouraged to pack a picnic, grab a blanket and gather for an evening of classical favourites capped off with a remarkable fireworks display. Source

Back at Powell Hall, SLSO has developed a very extraordinary “Live at Powell Hall” concert lineup where SLSO covers movie soundtracks like *Raiders of the Lost Ark* or *Singin’ in the Rain*, or unexpected tributes to artists like Johnny Cash or Queen. Source

SLSO has even paired up and performed live with unconventional pop and hip hop artists such as Nelly, which certainly drew an out-of-the-ordinary crowd. Source

It’s clear that their technique is paying off, as SLSO reported a record breaking 2016, with increases in both revenue and attendance. Ticket revenue reached as high as $6.87 million (4% higher than the previous year) and donations from over 5,000 individuals brought in a grand total of $7.68 million. Source
Explore Alternative Pricing Strategies

It should come as no surprise that pricing is a major factor when it comes to attracting new patrons or members, particularly younger generations. As Erin Rollman, co-founder/actor/writer from Bunport Theater says, “There’s no question that price is completely key to attracting a younger audience.”

Emily Galey, assistant patron services manager at Performing Arts Fort Worth, the non-profit organisation that owns and operates Bass Performance Hall, seconds that statement. “We really reflect our mission in patron services by extending ticketing at reduced pricing for sought after patron groups. We also extend special event rental spaces gratis to groups that want to come in and just have time to be in the building.” In this way, Performing Arts Fort Worth has been able to increase exposure of the facility and get more buyers in the doors.
Not everyone is fortunate enough to be able to enjoy the performing arts. There are many who still miss out, due to social disadvantage, distance or other circumstances beyond their control. A Victorian art centre found an innovative way of closing this gap, by directly supporting school and community groups through a subsidy program called the First Call Fund. Eligible schools and community partners can see performances, participate in programs and workshops.

The First Call Fund provides a means for ongoing engagement with the state’s largest performing arts centre by covering the cost of tickets, transport and other costs associated with a visit to Arts Centre Melbourne.

The First Call Fund assesses each school and community group’s eligibility based on socioeconomic disadvantages, diverse cultural or linguistical backgrounds, disabilities and learning needs, and also communities who have been affected by special circumstances such as drought, floods and bushfires. This initiative has provided the people of Victoria, no matter their economical background, ongoing engagement with Victoria’s largest performing arts centre, leading to greater benefits from the arts experiences it provides. [Source]

Yerba Buena Center for the Arts (YBCA) prides itself in trying to be a citizen institution, asserting that anyone is welcome to come and experience art within their walls. As part of that commitment, YBCA has been digging into potential barriers to visitation, including price. In May 2016, they launched a pay-what-you-can membership program in the spirit of making art radically affordable in one of the country’s most expensive cities. According to event systems manager, Alex Randall, and membership and development coordinator, Summer Hirtzel, YBCA wants to position membership as a way to not just gain benefits, but also as a way to feel involved, to have a stake and “be a part of this organisation.” Within nine months of launch, YBCA added about 700 pay-as-you go members to their existing 1,000, almost doubling memberships, and they’ve been getting good feedback through press and social media channels. [Source 1, Source 2]
Establish Strategic Partnerships

In every community there exists a variety of organisations similarly motivated to make a cultural impact or generate awareness with a specific demographic. This means that there are likely some great strategic partnerships for your organisation just waiting to happen!

Performing Arts Fort Worth has found a lot of value in strategic partnerships. For example, a few years back in advance of presenting *Dr. Seuss’ How the Grinch Stole Christmas! The Musical*, Performing Arts Fort Worth partnered with Telemundo to reach out to their Spanish-speaking demographic. They arranged for a Telemundo reporter to accompany someone dressed up as the Grinch to go to a local school and read the classic story. From the school, they went on to the local science and history museum, reading the story and taking photos with audiences there, before ending the run at a public Christmas tree lighting. In addition to a good bump in ticket sales, Performing Arts Fort Worth also got a lot of buzz online and in the press as a direct result of the engagement. “It was a cool event for the community, and the news got on board as well so we got some TV exposure. The kids were given the opportunity to get some cheap tickets to the show, and it was really just neat to see the kids interact with the story,” said Brad Evans, advertising and promotions manager. “It gave us the opportunity to engage with different entities within the community, and we opened the door for some first time visitors.”

Evans said it is important to find partners where a longer-term relationship can be developed and repeat partnerships can occur throughout the years in a way that benefits both organisations. And as assistant patron services manager, Emily Galey, emphasised, “The motivation behind partnerships is not necessarily just to sell tickets. It’s more about creating something fun for the community.” For performing arts centres, the motivation should always tie back to the core mission of the organisation.
In similar spirit, the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts (YBCA) uses strategic partnerships to further its support of the community. Recently, YBCA entered into a partnership with the San Francisco city planning department to hold the Market Street Prototyping Festival, which was an effort by the planning department to find innovative ways to get people to take a break from their busy lives and spend more time on Market Street. YBCA has access to a large network of creative minds who know how to inspire people to gather together, so they invited around 30 teams of artists, architects and engineers to be a part of the festival by showcasing inventive ways to take 25 feet of sidewalk on Market Street that would inspire people to pause and interact with that space or with other people. The creative projects ranged from a fun house with mirrors to a wooden hallway filled with trees and dirt in place of the usual concrete.

During the three day festival, Market Street saw hundreds of thousands of people pass through these prototypes while the creators and the city planning department looked on to find some insight about what might stick. Some ideas are currently being incubated and potentially permanently worked in to Market Street. The involvement on YBCA’s part gave them and their artists a great level of exposure among citizens of San Francisco, and helped make the community a better place.
That’s a Wrap

You need more than one-time patrons to pay the bills and support your mission to bring arts education and awareness to your community. Ideally, attendees will become subscribers, members, or even donors. In order to advance your audience along this course, you need to foster a sense of loyalty and community with them, expand your appeal and alleviate some of the barriers that face today’s prospective patron. And, as always, no matter what you do, make sure that your underlying mission continues to take centre stage.

Want to chat more about the strategies and examples discussed here? Don’t hesitate to reach out. We have a stellar cast of performing arts and technology experts who would love to help you overcome your challenges to reaching new audiences!

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