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Embracing a Path to Increased Revenue Generation: Four Creative Cues to Borrow from Artists

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The house lights dim, the audience quiets, the curtain rises. The performance begins and the audience engages with the work onstage. It is challenging and new, asks questions, and makes them think. Tremendous time and energy goes into the artistic process. Artistic professionals consistently focus on moving the art form forward, actively pushing boundaries and illuminating new experiences for artists and audiences alike.

However, that creativity often stops on the artistic or curatorial side of an organization. On the administrative side, marketing and development teams rely on traditional tactics to attract patrons and generate revenue. In this edition of *Arts Insights*, we explore why the administrative side of arts and culture organizations often opt for the path of least resistance and the four creative cues administrative leaders can borrow from their artistic counterparts to empower staff into generating growth in earned and contributed revenue streams through a more creative and transformational approach.

NEW PRESSURES, OLD TACTICS

Arts and culture organizations suffer from many common challenges that hinder creative thinking. Lack of time, limited human resources, and minimal funding are common justifications. Many are still recovering from the devastating effects of the 2008 financial meltdown. Boards have tightened belts on the expense side yet expect the organization to increase revenues to ensure sustainability and contingency funding for existing programming while achieving growth of mission-driven engagement in the community. Administrative teams are understaffed and overworked. Pressured by budgets and driven by the immediate need to raise money or sell tickets, marketing and development teams implement the same old tactics to reach organizational and departmental goals. In many cases, arts and culture organizations have become static and risk averse, very much counter to their missions and core values. In order to transform audience development programs and generate growth in both earned and contributed revenue streams, the arts and culture industry would be well-served by taking the following steps and creative cues from the artistic side of the organizations.

These new pressures call for new solutions. Administrative, development, and marketing plans can no longer be grounded in the thinking of, “we don’t do that” or “that is too difficult.” Organizations must assess, “...whether arts leaders can embrace the changes that are so clearly taking place, and turn their creative and entrepreneurial energies to marketing and audience development with the same energy that they focus on putting art on the stage.”¹

¹ Eugene Carr and Michelle Paul, *Breaking the Fifth Wall: Rethinking Arts Marketing for the 21st Century*, (Patron Publishing, 2011), Page 161

STEP 1: REFLECT ON THE PAST

Not unlike a visual art critique or receiving notes after a performance, arts organizations must reflect on what has been done in the past in order to assess what can be improved upon or changed in the future. Development and marketing teams often put forth the same campaigns each year without generating incremental revenues. The programs are new but the messaging stays the same. These repetitive ways of communicating with donors, ticket buyers, or community partners become redundant and lifeless. In order to change this cycle, administrative teams should take the time to ask and answer the following questions immediately following a major campaign or event:

1. **What went well?** Take note of the good things to replicate in the future.
2. **What could be improved or changed?** Ideas, in theory, do not always work as planned in reality but there is no need to completely scrap a solid idea. Start brainstorming now what could be tweaked so it works better the next time.
3. **What did not work?** Some ideas just do not work and the sooner a team can abandon a failed concept, the sooner they can begin thinking of different ideas.

STEP 2: COLLABORATE INTERNALLY

Arts and culture organizations are competing for audiences in a crowded marketplace. With an onslaught of messages and ever-increasing cultural options, it is imperative that administrative teams make their organization stand out. "Creativity is at the heart of arts marketing - and not simply because what is being marketed is the product of an individual or group creative act. Arts marketing must communicate an experience...To create effective, persuasive communication for a variety of audiences - almost certainly with limited resources - requires imaginative solutions. As with any creative act the rewards for carrying this off successfully are huge."²

Follow the data to examine what components of the "tried and true" have generated results. Then, organizations can think holistically about the story they have to tell their audience, the key strength of the organizational brand, and how to align these elements with the artistic vision. Brainstorming with the staff, listening across the organization, and partnering with patrons are just a few ways administrative teams can collaborate with others internally in order to add sophistication and excitement to campaign planning.

Brainstorm With the Staff

Just as musicians practice their instrument each day, organizations should practice brainstorming activities regularly to ensure that they are consistently generating the best possible staff-driven ideas. Often in traditional brainstorming sessions, quantity is valued over quality and criticism of others' ideas is not tolerated. Instead, consider a facilitated process that uses these tips to maximize the outcome of brainstorming sessions:

1. **Propose the right questions** - Proposing specific questions can help employees stay focused and keep the brainstorming session on track.
2. **Work alone** - Working in groups can often lead to a lack of participation from introverted staff. Employees should generate ideas on their own and then carve out time away from the distraction of day-to-day responsibilities to discuss as a group and garner a greater variety of quality results.
3. **Look outside the industry** - When struggling to think of new ideas, look beyond the arts and culture industry. "Sometimes the best way to step outside the box (without stepping too far) is to adopt the art of fusion... Adopting something that's working in another field may be the perfect addition to show validity."³

² Elizabeth Hills, Terry O'Sullivan, and Catherine O'Sullivan, *Creative Arts Marketing*, (Routledge, 2011), Page viii

³ Ashley Mady, "Thinking Outside The Box, Within Reason," *Forbes*, January 20, 2015, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/yec/2015/01/20/thinking-outside-the-box-within-reason/#44431d5070fc>.

4. **Allow critique** – Permit staff to make constructive comments and suggestions. Disagreement can “...spark greater engagement with other’s viewpoints, and forces people to constantly re-evaluate their own ideas... In the right environment, opposition can lead to greater ingenuity.”⁴

Listen Across the Organization

How can an organization create messaging that is as vibrant, forward-thinking, and creative as the work it is promoting? This often requires development and marketing staff to rely not solely on data but also on what is a cultural fit for the organization. Though there is often a divide between those who bring the art to life and those in the office who help support it, it can be highly effective to collaborate with the artistic or curatorial staff. The way an organization talks to the public must genuinely reflect the innovative art being produced or displayed. A great deal of information can be revealed, processed, and put to practical use by working directly with these artistic minds. There is an opportunity and a need to listen across an organization and gain answers and input from a wide range of staff – box office, member services, telemarketing/telefunding. Their knowledge can be utilized to determine what is driving patron engagement or lack thereof. And vice versa – true collaboration with artistic leadership is a key ingredient to achieving growth in earned and contributed revenue.

Partner With Patrons

How can marketing and outreach efforts develop a genuine connection between art and audience? Much can also be learned from collaborating with an organization’s most important stakeholder – its patrons. Arts marketing is now at the nexus of patron engagement. One cannot simply be in the business of selling tickets or renewing memberships. Artists and creative teams do not create in a vacuum and marketing staff cannot create compelling and engaging campaigns in one either. The audience can be a partner in the creative process, genuinely engaged in what the organization is creating.

In 2010, several arts and cultural organizations in the Seattle area discovered that, “when they start connecting with prospective audiences in new ways, amazing things can happen.” Impacted by a decrease in funding that would normally introduce young students to the arts and mindful of an aging audience, Evergreen City Ballet, Renton History Museum, and Northwest Symphony Orchestra all created programs that sought out and engaged children in hopes of inspiring a new generation of future patrons. Evergreen City Ballet began introducing dance to local elementary school students. Similarly, Renton History Museum brought the museum experience to classrooms when funding for field trips was cut from school budgets. Northwest Symphony Orchestra sent its conductor to work with middle school students on their own composition, which would later be performed in concert.⁵ Each of these organizations acknowledged an issue and crafted a creative solution that not only appealed to the audiences but was also mission-appropriate in a way that drove both immediate and long-term revenue generation.

STEP 3: PLAN AHEAD

Much like a rehearsal process that begins months in advance, administrative teams must plan ahead in order to execute new ideas successfully and achieve set goals. Implementing immediate change can be difficult. Therefore, it is crucial that administrative leaders take time to discuss desired goals with staff. A dance company would not learn a new ballet the day before opening night, so why would administrative teams wait until the last minute to create an innovative development or marketing campaign? Creating the time and space to examine from the 30-thousand foot view and seek outside expertise if needed will allow administrative teams to see the long arc of patron loyalty and engagement.

⁴ Rochelle Bailis, “Brainstorming Doesn’t Work—Do This Instead,” *Forbes*, October 8, 2014, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/rochellebailis/2014/10/08/brainstorming-doesnt-work-do-this-instead/#7d659a637f20>.

⁵ Judy Dunn, “Arts and Culture Groups Think Outside the Box,” *The Business Report*, May 2010, <http://evergreencityballet.org/press/artsculturethinkoutsidebox.pdf>.

STEP 4: STAY FLEXIBLE

Even the best-laid plans can go awry. With employee turnover, scheduling conflicts, or competing organizational priorities, it is critical that teams stay flexible and, similar to utilizing an understudy, maintain the ability to adapt when the unexpected occurs. In order to respond to changes in the environment, organizations must integrate a culture of tracking trends in patron engagement through regular reports on key metrics that follow fundraising and marketing campaigns. In 2008, Calgary Pro Musica Society struggled to fill its performance space two nights per week after it moved to a new venue. Artistic Director Dean O’Brien said, “If we just dig our feet in and say we will do things the same way we have and we will fight back against it, we are not going to be happy with what happens.” The organization met this challenge by adapting to new ticket-buying habits and creating interactive programming that appealed to a new audience.⁶

FINAL RECOMMENDATIONS

Cultivating an atmosphere of constant creativity may be achieved by reflecting on the past, collaborating across the organization, planning ahead, and maintaining enough flexibility to respond to new trends. To generate growth in earned and contributed revenue streams and build transformational community engagement and patron loyalty, stay off the path of least resistance and achieve results by applying these four creative cues from the artistic process. Utilize the smart, creative marketing and development teams in a way that is as innovative and thought-provoking as the products the artists deliver. Artistic teams are challenging audiences to adapt to new ways of thinking. It is time for administrative teams to be equally brave, challenging staff, board, and volunteers to implement new strategies and avoid the path of least resistance.



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⁶ Jennifer Lewington, “Arts groups thinking outside the box – and way beyond the box office,” *The Globe and Mail*, May 3, 2013, <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/theatre-and-performance/arts-groups-thinking-outside-the-box-and-way-beyond-the-box-office/article11700044/>.