

The two projects that showed the most success in effecting lasting, organizational approaches to cultivating audiences were those that explored patron values using surveys that engaged people in a dialogue around the benefits they seek and the meaning they find in arts experiences. This patron dialogue—or *values-based* surveying—helped each organization better understand their audiences in a more personal way.

For Phase II, surveys were built around values themes such as personal creativity, social connections, intellectual stimulation, cultural literacy, and other aspirations. The survey methods typically involved a line of questioning that encouraged people to reflect on what brings them meaning and how the experiences fulfill them.



Kimberly Hines, director of marketing and communications for Kansas City Friends of Alvin Ailey (KCFAA) chose to take part in this study “to get to a place of making decisions based on what we know instead of what we thought we knew.”

One of her lessons learned was that although Ailey has always been best known for its dance performances, the patron feedback revealed that the most valued aspects of KCFAA’s mission were: exposing children to creative expression, encouraging them to make smart life choices, and providing fun, challenging programs for students.

When it comes to joining and giving to KCFAA, “people want to give to us because they believe in what we’re doing for kids, not because we are giving them a t-shirt.”
 – Kimberly Hines, Director of Marketing and Communications, KC Friends of Alvin Ailey

As a result, Hines enhanced the profile of the youth education programs and is using their popularity as leverage to encourage deeper engagement through membership and other avenues.

The overall implications from the research seemed simple on the surface—the more “connected” people felt to an organization and its mission, the more active, supportive, and invested they were in the institution. But the underlying questions remained, “beyond delivering a quality artistic experience, what helps *facilitate the connection* that drives retention and continued investment? What experiences are most memorable for people and why? What are the important stories to tell? How do people’s aspirations and purchase motivation correlate with these stories? What are the broader implications for audience development?”

Phase III (2007-2008)

Building on lessons from Phase II, the Phase III research was designed around a storytelling approach in which people openly related personal accounts of meaningful arts experiences through an email survey. The following organizations took part in Phase III of the project, using a standard set of questions that was customized for each organization and sent under their own signature to their own audience e-mail lists with a cover letter from staff.

Sample Questions

How personally connected do you feel with this organization?

If you had a particularly memorable experience with this organization, we would be grateful if you would briefly share that story with us. What happened to make the experience stand out for you?

Which types of experiences have made you feel the most connected?

- American Jazz Museum
- Carlsen Center at Johnson County Community College
- The Coterie Theatre
- Harriman-Jewell Series
- Heartland Men's Chorus
- Kansas City Friends of Alvin Ailey
- Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art
- Lyric Opera of Kansas City
- Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art
- Starlight Theatre
- Unicorn Theatre

The goals of Phase III were to:

- Learn what drives enjoyment and deeper connections.
- Evoke memories of positive arts experiences.
- Report results to help make decisions about programs and communication.
- Gather patron quotes and comments useful to sharing the story.

The organizations also needed to know if the services, educational opportunities, print and Web site materials, enhancement programs, social opportunities, receptions, parties, and the time spent on activities in *support* of the artistic program really made a difference to their patrons. It did, and to a larger degree than anticipated. The stories were rich with insights into what mattered.

"I love listening to the cast members and director respond to the questions and offer their insights into the play and the Coterie's production of the play."
- Survey Respondent

From the collected stories and correlation of various data points, overall, it appears that efforts to deepen the "feeling of connection" among arts audiences are worth consideration within all the various touch points organizations have with their patrons and prospects. Patrons with the strongest feelings of connection attend more often, give more often, and are rewarded more deeply by a variety of personal, social, and communal benefits derived from their arts experiences.

There appears to be opportunity in growing deeper relationships. Arts patrons welcome stronger feelings of connection through opportunities to learn more about the art and creative process and connect with artists, staff members, and volunteers as well as with other audience members who share their interests.

"The first performance we attended of the Heartland Men's Chorus was last Christmas. Both my husband and I found it inspiring, somber and hilarious; ultimately transforming. I've never walked out of a performance in such a joyous state of mind. We were hooked and we've attended every performance since!"
- Survey Respondent

Close to 30 percent of the more than 2,000 responses gathered included some form of open comment regarding "memorable experiences." The most strongly connected patrons spoke expressively about the memories that spark their desire to return and bring others with them. The most connected patrons are no doubt an invisible sales force spreading the good buzz through word-of-mouth. Nurturing a deeper connection before, during, and after the event or visit reminds people of their

positive experiences and merits consideration as part of marketing and audience development strategies.

Reflections

The data we collected through stories was not typical market research and required two leaps of faith:

- 1) We had to believe our audiences would be willing to share incredibly personal experiences and take the time to do it.
- 2) We had to believe these stories could be correlated to behavior and leave us with results we could really use.

"I really enjoyed seeing the black poets collective perform at the Blue Room (American Jazz Museum)...They inspired me to dig deep within myself and find my creative voice."
- Survey Respondent

Taking both leaps paid off. We received rich and powerful feedback from many respondents that the consultant synthesized and tied to other questions. While this innovative approach takes more time (and sometimes more money) than a typical check-the-box survey, analysis of this kind brings a much deeper understanding of audiences and their value for our work. It also tells us how we best deliver that value. And we can authentically convey how the arts transform lives. We learned a lot by remaining flexible and open, letting the initiative be driven by the information as it was uncovered, and not by pursuing a preconceived scientific theory that we thought we could prove to be true.

Tools You Can Use Now

In sum, these are highlights of insights gleaned through the work and recommendations made in the Phase III study:

- Use the language your audience uses, including their words and quotes, to honestly communicate what one might expect to gain from attendance.
- Track first-time buyers and visitors and integrate follow-up communication tactics to welcome them.
- Use pre- and post-performance engagement activities to underscore the benefits of attendance and cement them in memory.
- Communicate with audiences without selling, such as sharing comments from the artists about the venue or about the creative process, feedback from other patrons, and opportunities to learn more or provide ideas.
- Encourage people to download support materials from your Web site such as lyrics, interviews, and clips.
- Strengthen personal touches and connections between the artists, the art, the community, and the organizations.
- Collect stories from your audience. Use these to reflect on your marketing message by asking, “what story are we telling?” Is this the right story? Is there a better story that conveys our message in clear, simple language of our audience?

Respondents who reported feeling “not” connected were offered the opportunity to suggest openly what might help strengthen their feeling of connection. The most frequent suggestions included:

- ▶ more regular communications;
- ▶ more diverse programming;
- ▶ more social and learning engagement activities;
- ▶ improved customer services, purchase flexibility;
- ▶ discounted offers; and
- ▶ more tie-ins to communities and neighborhoods.

Return on Investment

The organizations involved in the research found the results directly translated into actionable ideas. They used results to re-tool communications by changing words, phrases, and images, to encourage deeper engagement by using stories in their communications, and to increase customer service messaging and new paths to the organization.

One example comes from The Kansas City Ballet, who chose some of the most touching stories they collected to add to their Web site (<http://www.kcballet.org/50/stories.html>). Giving their audience a vehicle to share their memories, in their own voice, was a new and innovative concept. The quotes also were shared with the Ballet staff.

This renewal of mission, straight from those the staff works so hard to reach, has been invigorating.

“I say that ballet is good for my soul. My tickets are for Friday night. On Friday night I am tired after the week at work, but I don’t allow myself to think about not attending a performance. Once the dancing begins my spirit rises and my energy increases.”
-Kansas City Ballet Attendee

To further strengthen connections with audiences (subscribers, donors, corporate contacts, parents of our students and others), the Ballet reinstated a quarterly printed newsletter. They found the newsletters help patrons feel connected to the performances and dancers. Other overall highlights were that 20 percent said they expect to attend the Ballet more often than they do now. And, nearly 39 percent said they plan to recommend the Ballet more often than they do now.

Call to Action

Even without replication of the research, the Phase III report can be of benefit immediately to arts organizations in other cities and should be required reading for arts organizations and arts funders that seek to increase audiences and earned revenues. While many of these findings are intuitive and organizations are already working hard to provide audiences with outstanding experiences, it is worthwhile to examine how value is delivered at various points to engage, retain, and ultimately evolve the patron relationship.

"This qualitative data helps us to understand in a new and visceral way the kinds of deep connections people make with each other through the arts and how that contributes to their sense of community. Hearing from arts enthusiasts in their own words about why they value the arts can help persuade business and civic leaders that the arts play a key role in the lives of their customers and constituents.

-Paul Tyler, Grants Director, Arts Council of Metropolitan Kansas City

As noted by Jerry Yoshitomi, the findings of this initiative align with recent research in social psychology and marketing, as well as the Web 2.0, social marketing, self-curated world we see everywhere. The recommendations and tools included in the full report take into consideration the changes in cultural communication methods and make use of new, more efficient ways of using technology to keep marketing costs down while increasing patron connection and response.

Our hope is that other arts marketers, development people, and programmers will learn from these results ways to better engage with their audiences and find new ones. Art transforms us and transforms the world, and we have undertaken this work to help you further your mission of keeping the arts alive and well across all communities. Authentic stories of transformation that come from your audiences are powerful and add meaning to marketing and development messages delivered through any medium.

For more information about this study or any of its research phases, please contact Surale Phillips, President, Decision Support Partners, Inc. PO Box 6573, Bozeman, MT 59771. Tel (406)-285-4479 or surale@suralephillips.com or Paul Tyler, Grants Director, Arts Council of Metropolitan Kansas City. Tel. (816) 221-1777, tyler@artskc.org.



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