

7 Success Stories

Audience Development

Growing Audiences



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**musical
america** June 2016
SPECIAL REPORTS

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Each article in this issue is also found on our web site, MusicalAmerica.com, in the [Special Reports](#) section.

Introduction



As the options for electronic entertainment continue to explode, arts organizations are endeavoring to devise ever-more ingenious solutions for growing audiences and staying relevant in a mind-bogglingly diverse and changing world.

In recent years, The Wallace Foundation has supported a number of organizations in creating successful audience-building campaigns, many of which are in [Building Audiences for the Arts](#) and written up by Bob Harlow. We asked Bob to summarize the highlights of several of those campaigns for Musical America. He describes how the [Pacific Northwest Ballet](#) managed to convince teenagers that ballet was not strictly for their grandparents, but was in fact a rather hip artform; how a pop-culture radio personality who loved opera managed to turn his listeners into first-timers at the [Minnesota Opera](#); and how the [Clay Studio](#) and the [Fleisher Art Memorial](#) expanded their upper-middle-class patronage to reach new and diverse audiences, some of them even in their own neighborhoods.

John Fleming reports on the [New World Symphony's](#) successful campaign to reach new and younger patrons through its al fresco “Wallcasts,” HD projections of concerts going on inside the snazzy, Frank Gehry-designed New World Center concert hall. Many of the 2,000 attendees at Wallcasts are newcomers to classical music and 30 percent are under age 45, writes Fleming. NWS CEO Howard Herring maintains that buying a ticket isn’t so much the point as simply building an audience, planting the seeds for future ticket buyers.

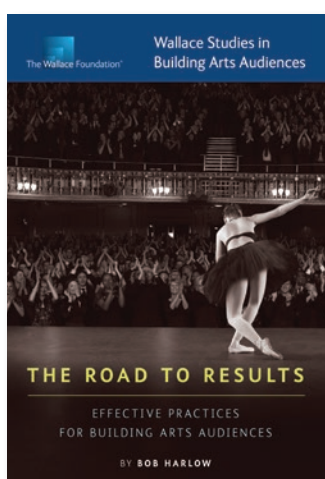
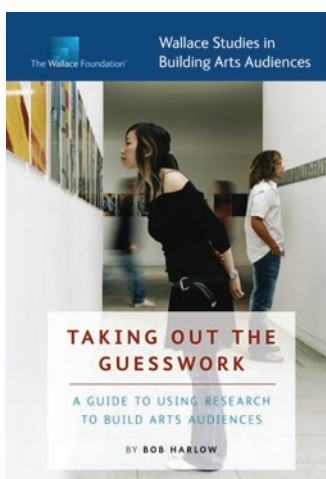
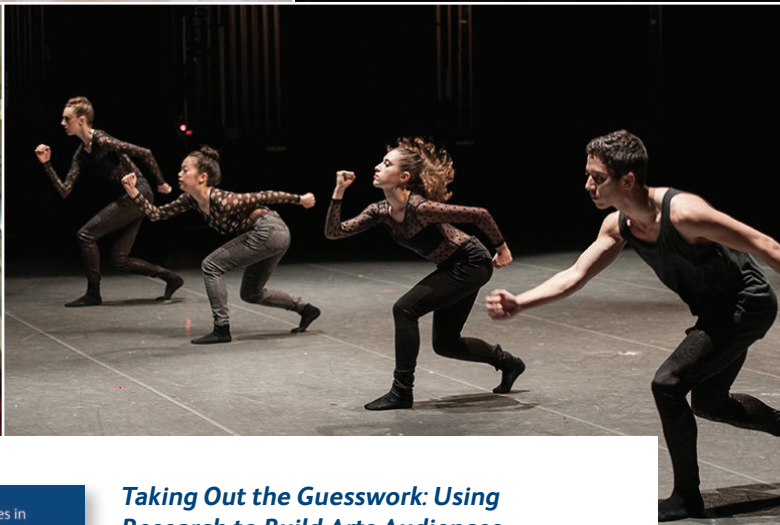
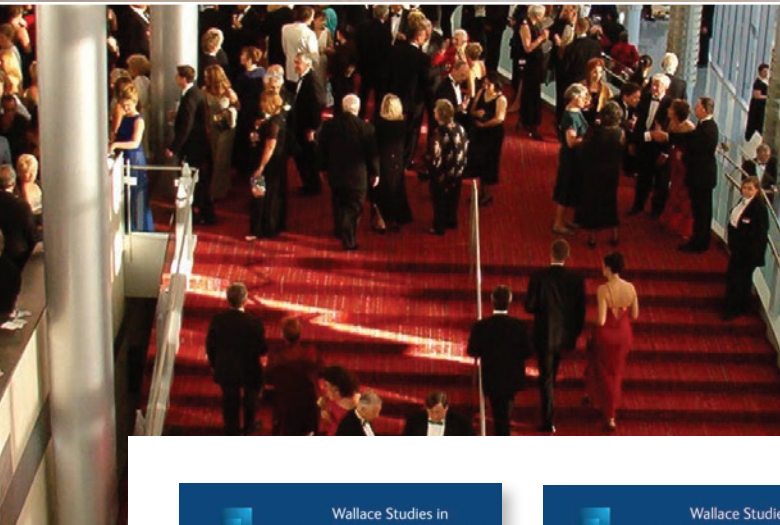
New York’s [Manhattan Theatre Club](#) is managing to educate and grow a paying audience through its highly successful “30 Under 30” campaign, which offers \$30 tickets to people age 30 and under. Marketing Director Debra Waxman tells author Nancy Malitz that the goal is to reach young professionals “who want to enjoy culture but don’t necessarily have all the financial resources.” MTC used its own interns to form a focus group and discovered that social media was key to reaching their age group. The end result: The 30 Under 30 program launched in 2008 with 200 members and has since grown to create a database of 16,500 people.

The [League of Chicago Theatres](#) took a page out of the city’s annual restaurant week and launched Chicago Theatre Week, a collaborative approach to audience development. Ticket prices for hundreds of shows are confined to three specific price points, making it easier for people to decide which bargain to grab. In just three years, Theatre Week has grown to include over 100 participating Chicago theaters and sell 10,500 tickets. “The one thing that unites all our member theaters,” LCT Executive Director Deb Clapp tells Malitz, “is that we need butts in seats.”

Regards,
Susan Elliott
Editor, Special Reports

YOU'RE WORKING HARD TO BUILD AUDIENCES.

TWO NEW STUDIES CAN HELP.



Taking Out the Guesswork: Using Research to Build Arts Audiences

Learn about three tasks key to successful audience building: understanding potential audiences, creating effective promotional materials, and tracking and assessing progress. Accompanied by an infographic.

The Road to Results: Effective Practices for Building Arts Audiences

Based on case studies of 10 arts organizations that undertook audience-building projects as part of the Wallace Excellence Awards initiative, this guide and infographic pinpoint nine practices that successful efforts had in common.



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THE PACIFIC NORTHWEST BALLET

Gets Past

By Bob Harlow

“It’s Not for People like Us”



[Pacific Northwest Ballet](#) is the fifth-largest ballet company in the United States (annual budget, \$23 million), and presents a diverse repertoire of classical and contemporary ballet in over 100 performances each year. It also includes a school with a professional-track curriculum, as well as non-professional classes for children and adults.

THE CHALLENGE

Ballet is perceived as old fashioned and elitist

When Peter Boal became artistic director of Seattle’s Pacific Northwest Ballet (PNB) in 2005, he prioritized building teen and young adult audiences, responding to nationwide trends of sharp declines in attendance at performing arts events. ([National Endowment for the Arts surveys](#) reflect an estimated 10 percent decline, at least, since the 1990s.) He believed it was essential to “plant the seeds” for audiences of the future, or ballet could all but disappear. The challenge was one of relevance: young people thought that ballet was for their parents and grandparents, not for them. “There



Pacific Northwest Ballet
Artistic Director Peter Boal.

are certain performing arts that young audiences do care about,” says Boal. “They care about hearing a musical group. They care about certain films. I want ballet to be in that category.”

THE GOAL

Change perceptions; reach a younger and broader audience

Strategy I: Lower ticket prices

An important first step was creating several low-price attendance opportunities, which not only provided access but also signaled that ballet was for everyone, not just those of a certain economic standing. These programs included

- \$5 one-hour rehearsal previews on select Fridays every two to three months hosted by Boal and his artistic staff in

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PNB's rehearsal studios. These regularly sell out (there are only 200 seats) to audiences young and old.

- A "25 & Under" program allowing patrons ages 25 and under to buy two tickets for \$25 (or one ticket for \$15) for any Friday performance. Six months after this program launched, PNB was regularly selling more than 250 tickets per performance.
- Partnering with TeenTix, an arts access program that offers teenagers \$5 day-of-show tickets for nearly 60 organizations throughout Seattle. Just shy of 1,000 teens bought tickets to PNB performances in the first years that program ran.

Strategy II: Crack the relevance barrier

Boal and Ellen Walker, then marketing (now executive) director were pleased by the modest response to the ticketing programs, but they were not seeing a growing momentum. They felt they needed to still break through that relevance barrier. Walker believed the company would need to communicate to teens and young adults in a different way. She had heard from younger audience members that PNB's online presence was lacking—the web site was difficult to navigate, and PNB was not active in social media spaces.



Pacific Northwest Ballet
Executive Director
Ellen Walker.

To support new online and offline communication and outreach strategies, PNB applied for and received a four-year (2009–12) \$750,000 Wallace Excellence Award from The Wallace Foundation. The award

- supported a web site redesign
- funded an expansion of PNB's in-house video production capabilities
- allowed PNB to update its visual brand identity
- underwrote a research program that helped PNB gain a better understanding of how to connect with teens and young adults.

Specific goals included increasing ticket purchases by 40 percent and increasing repeat visits—the number of young adults who return for two or more events within the same season—by 20 percent.

Step 1. Conduct market research

As a first step, PNB engaged third-party research partners to conduct two rounds of focus groups with teens and young adults exploring their perceptions of ballet, the company, its web site, and its marketing. The focus groups revealed that ballet had the kinds of barriers facing many classical art forms, including perceptions that it was elitist and stuffy. They also pointed out some ways that PNB's communications (inadvertently) reinforced those perceptions (discussed further below).

Addressing these barriers meant changes to the web site and promotional materials to communicate approachability and accessibility while still conveying the artistic excellence the company's current audience cherished. Walker saw this as critical—teens and young adults needed to hear again and again that they were welcome at PNB. She says: "We wanted to create convenience, to create dialogue, and to create a sense of belonging for everyone. . . . We wanted to say, 'We're all these things under the umbrella and there's a place for you here.'"

Step 2. Act on market research

Focus-group sessions indicated that both the web site and advertising materials inadvertently reinforced notions of ballet as boring, stuffy, and of PNB as aloof. The web site communicated staid formality. Young people who knew PNB said the somber color scheme did not reflect the excitement of attending a performance. Those unfamiliar with the company said they could not find enough information to get to know PNB from the outside. Walker had heard anecdotally from students and younger visitors that it was clunky and difficult to navigate.

a) Redesign web site

A professional web design firm was engaged to update the web site with a new and more inviting color scheme, less clutter, and more intuitive navigation. The redesigned web site also had greater content and functionality, including:

- Expanded ticket-buying capabilities, with seat selection and online subscription purchase
- Video and image galleries for each performance and for specific fundraising campaigns
- An online calendar that provided a monthly view of upcoming performances and events, with each entry linked to its own

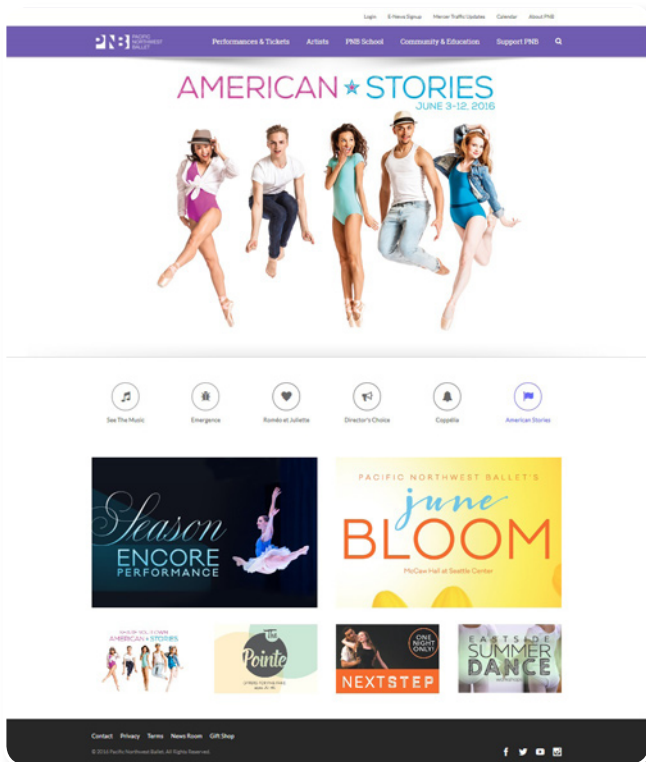
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web page providing detailed event information

- A link to the real-time traffic report for the area around the theater to help attendees plan how to get to performances
- Additional written content about PNB dancers and choreographers



Screenshot, PNB homepage before web site redesign.



Screenshot, PNB homepage May 2016.

b) Expand in-house production capabilities

PNB wanted to expand its in-house production capabilities to create a steady stream of videos to post on YouTube and platforms like Twitter and Facebook. The idea was to introduce new audiences to the dancers and their everyday, behind-the-scenes goings-on in classes and rehearsals, as well as to promote upcoming programming. An intern with an HD camera, a Mac computer, and editing software (total cost, less than \$7,500) created the videos, which soon won thousands of YouTube fans and millions of annual views. It was a low-cost way to create interaction and dialogue around ballet.

Overhauling the web site with the new videos, easier navigation, greater functionality, and a more aesthetically pleasing design took over a year; it was done with continuous input and review by PNB staff. Research with visitors to the web site indicated it was working.

c) Update visual brand identity

As the focus groups indicated, PNB's advertising images were alienating to young people. Images of tiaras and tutus made them think ballet would be expensive. Distant stage shots made it difficult to see the emotions on the dancers' faces. Close-up photos of dancers holding positions that showcased precision and technical prowess looked awkward to people unfamiliar with ballet. Nothing communicated excitement.

So PNB changed its promotional look, moving to a lighter color palette, updating fonts (which focus group participants called "boring") and logos. Images of dancers holding awkward poses were dropped in favor of close-ups of company members showing intense emotional expressions or gazing directly at the viewer, with the goal of conveying immediacy and excitement.

d) Create exclusive programs

In response to concerns among some teens that they might feel uncomfortable as the only teens in an audience of older adults, PNB created a teen-only preview of "Next Step," its annual showcase of new work by PNB choreographers. This gave young audiences a sense of exclusivity, as well as putting them together with peers and performers, many of whom were to close their own age.



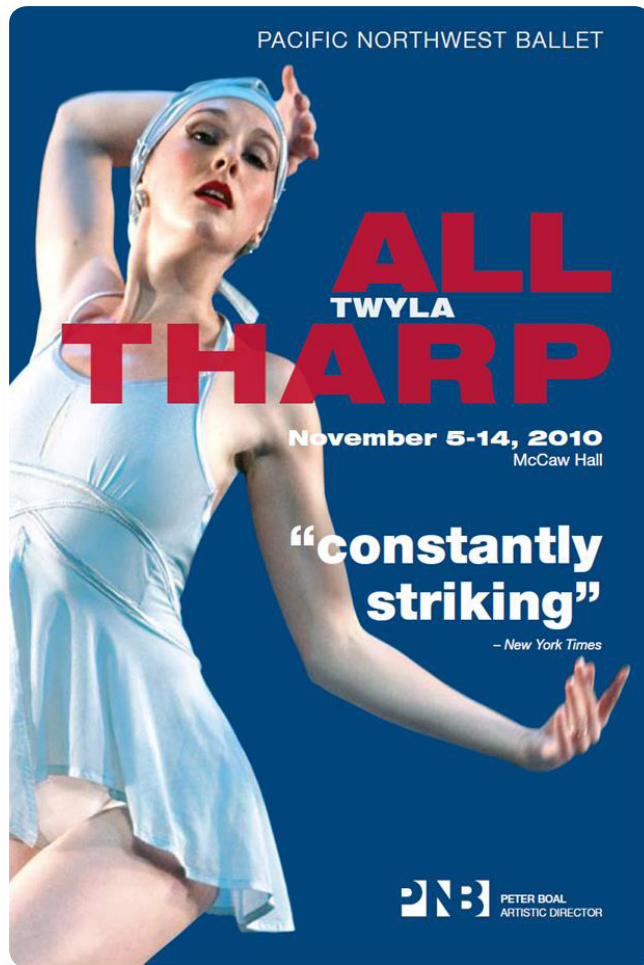
Advertisement before focus-group research.

e) Foster welcoming atmosphere

The company also made sure to welcome teens and young adults at its performances. Says Boal, "We talk to our ushers, our house manager, and all of our staff about being there to greet them and make them feel that they are important patrons of the ballet. Even if they only spent \$5 or \$12.50 to get in, we value the fact that they're there." Boal would introduce himself to young adults who were sitting in a special section of the house, and an announcement was placed in every program welcoming teens and, importantly, explaining to the rest of the audience why their presence was essential to the company's future.

RESULTS

Over four years, PNB's ticket sales to teens more than doubled and ticket sales to young adults under age 25 rose by 20 percent. Moreover, the number of teens and young adults who attended



Advertisement after focus-group research.

more than one performance per season rose by 55%. PNB effectively bucked national trends.

The case study report highlights several factors contributing to PNB's success, including an integrated strategy for welcoming young audiences and helping them get to know the company, as well as the remarkable alignment of the artistic and marketing teams.



BOB HARLOW

Bob Harlow, PhD, is a veteran market researcher who has spent 20 years using surveys, focus groups, and advanced analytics to help organizations more deeply understand their target audiences. He currently leads [Bob Harlow Research and Consulting, LLC](#), a market research consulting organization.

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Welcome Teens!

Wondering who that young ballet-goer is, sitting in that seat next to you? They could very well be a member of Seattle Center's Teen Tix program. Since the inception of this city-run arts access program for teenagers, Pacific Northwest Ballet has been a proud and passionate participant. Now in its sixth year of operation, Teen Tix provides Seattle-area teenagers with access to 37 arts organizations in an effort to engage young people in Seattle's vibrant cultural scene. Teen Tix membership enables teenagers to purchase day-of-show tickets to music, dance, theater, and arts events for only \$5.

For more information, visit Seattle Center's Teen Tix webpage at www.seattlecenter.com/teentix... or just lean over and ask the teen sitting next to you.

Program insert welcoming teens.

COSTS

This campaign was not cheap. By far, the greatest costs were research and the web site redesign.

- **Web site:** Professional fees to cover the scope, design, production, alignment with Tessitura, new code, and upgraded functionality totaled approximately \$270,000.
- **Research:** The two rounds of focus groups carried a budget of \$80,000, and web site visitor surveys before the redesign and at two follow-up waves, cost approximately \$50,000.
- **New Look and Feel** for PNB brand. The consultant fees for developing a new color scheme and PNB visual brand identity were approximately \$40,000.

Certain components of PNB's initiative delivered great value at a low cost, including the videos, teen preview night, and PNB's partnership with TeenTix.

	Baseline 2008–2009	Year 1 2009–2010	Year 2 2010–2011	Year 3 2011–2012	Year 4 2012–2013
TeenTix	69	1,279	1,491	1,434	2,075 [238% over baseline]
25 & Under	1,595	2,345	1,811	1,667	1,908 [20% over baseline]
Repeat Teen & Young Adult Visitors (2 or more visits, including subscriptions)	516	755	794	819	814

This case-study summary is based on the Wallace Foundation's [Getting Past "It's Not For People Like Us": Pacific Northwest Ballet Builds a Following with Teens and Young Adults](#).

By Bob Harlow

THE CLAY STUDIO

Hands-on Participation Opens New Doors



The Clay Studio, Philadelphia, PA, est. 1974.

Founded in 1974, [The Clay Studio](#) offers instruction at all levels to over 5,000 students annually. With artist residencies, studio rentals, a ceramic arts shop, and a gallery, it serves over 30,000 visitors each year. It has an annual budget of \$1.7 million.

THE CHALLENGE

A stagnant audience

In 2007 the Clay Studio (TCS) marked its 30-year anniversary. While there was reason to celebrate, there was also cause for concern; the audience was not growing. TCS was not only serving the same demographic—well-educated, middle-aged or older patrons—but also welcoming the same *people* day after day. Seeing so few new faces even at special exhibitions “panicked us a little,” says Jeff Guido, artistic director at the time.

THE GOAL

Reach a broader, younger crowd

TCS staff recognized that plenty of younger (ages 25 to 45) culturally active professionals lived in the area. Former President Amy Sarner Williams and current VP Jennifer Martin decided to try some new programming—gallery talks, studio tours, artist receptions—targeting a younger crowd.

Step 1. Get money, apply to the Wallace Foundation

To support their efforts, TCS applied for and received a four-year (January 2008 to December 2011), \$375,000 Wallace Excellence Award. The money was specifically targeted to

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(1) try different event and workshop formats designed to introduce professionals ages 20 to 45 to clay, (2) develop marketing tactics and materials to promote them, and (3) conduct audience research to strengthen and evaluate their efforts.

Step 2. Experiment with different formats

The staff tried a variety of new programs, such as the talks and tours; they also hosted events at local bars and other off-site locations popular with the younger age group. Attendance at on-site programs remained disappointing, however; off-site was better but didn't lead to follow-up visits to the studio.

Taking a cue from the DIY (Do-It-Yourself) era, arts managers at around this time had begun to recognize that engaging younger audiences meant offering opportunities to be an active, rather than passive, participant. TCS had always offered a pottery class, but at 10 weeks for \$300, it required a high level of commitment, especially for newcomers. So staff came up with the idea of "social workshops," one-evening sessions in which skilled instructors would walk participants through creating their first pieces at the wheel. Students would learn how to mold the material into simple but functional shapes that could later be glazed. The social clay workshops, called "Date Night" (to encourage people to sign up in pairs)



"Date Night" has been a huge success.

sold out the capacity of 36 seats quickly, sometimes weeks in advance, and the studio began holding them monthly and then later twice monthly.

Step 3. Conduct market research to understand and build on appeal of social workshops

To pinpoint what made Date Night so popular and how to build a deeper engagement with young professionals, TCS hired an outside firm to conduct focus groups. There were six, comprised of adults ages 25 to 45 who had varying degrees of experience with TCS, from those who had never visited to members and students. The research confirmed that participants liked the social and relaxed atmosphere of Date Night. It also suggested several ways TCS's marketing could be more effective:

- **Promote the experience itself.** Instead of showcasing objects on display, show images of what visitors could do at the venue, of people working with clay, for example. Focus-group participants were drawn to events and activities in which they were personally engaged.
- **Keep the message simple.** TCS produced a brochure four times a year that showcased all that was going on at the institution. But it could be overwhelming to newcomers; with so much to wade through, focus-group participants said they couldn't ascertain what TCS had for them.
- **Don't get too technical.** Brochures included terms like "wheel throwing," which meant nothing to focus-group participants who had no experience with clay. At worst, those terms made them think that the activities were for a different crowd. That's not surprising—the organization intended its class brochure for people with some experience with clay, not for newcomers. It was important to continue to write communications for TCS's more experienced audience base, but bringing new people into the fold would require a different approach.
- **Make it easier to participate.** Staff heard both in focus groups as well as from newcomers onsite that classes were too long; it was hard to jump from a social workshop, or from no experience at all, to weekly three-hour sessions over an eight- to 10-week period. Staff members kept hearing a refrain of "shorter, lower cost," consistent with general trends in the performing arts: people are no longer

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inclined to make the long-term commitment of a subscription package, for instance.

Step 4. Act on the research

- **Revamp class formats.** To help people connect with the studio in ways that fit their level of time and financial commitment, staff added five-week classes and two-day-weekend and single-session-afternoon workshops. They also offered a variety of free events (e.g., open houses where one could make an ornament or a shot glass) to get newcomers to make that difficult jump from bystander to participant.
- **Improve communications.** The organization began incorporating more language and photos into its marketing materials to better promote the experience of working with clay [see Figure 1]. It also altered its communications by (1) focusing on specific offerings—exhibits, events, classes, and workshops—so that audiences would not be overwhelmed and (2) dropping the jargon in favor of more colloquial language.

Step 5. Followup with additional research; use “action” language

To continue to refine how it talked about itself, TCS conducted additional research in late 2010 that included 30-minute telephone interviews with 26 TCS visitors ages 45 and under. Participants got most excited when talking about activities they could do while at the studio, not what the organization was or what it offered. So brochures, direct-mail pieces, and email campaigns that targeted the new audience used active verbs in their headlines: “Experience the Clay Studio” and “Get Out of Hand.” The web site was reorganized around eight action-oriented sections such as “see,” “learn,” “participate,” and “shop.” Each section contained images that (1) reflected the experience, rather than objects alone and (2) emphasized TCS as a social, friendly place.

RESULTS

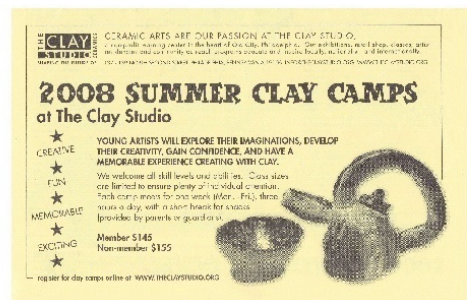
Enrollment triples, school revenue doubles

The efforts are paying off. Between 2008 and 2013, the number

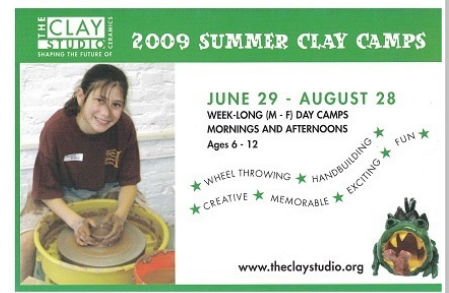


Figure 1. New marketing materials promoted the experience of working with clay.

Before



After



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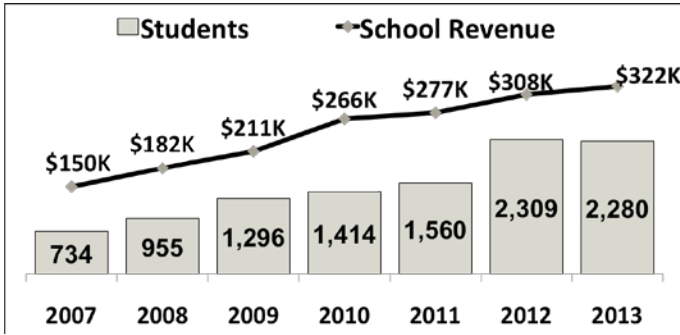


Figure 2. The Clay Studio Enrollment and School Revenue.

of visitors taking part in classes and workshops of any kind—not only 10- and five-week sessions, but also social workshops and weekend offerings—tripled [see Figure 2]. Revenue from the school—which includes tuition for classes, workshops, and summer clay “camps,” as well as supplies purchased in the school store—more than doubled.

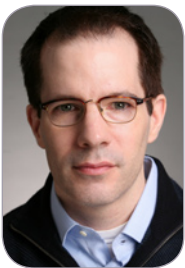
TCS staff has continued to build on its work since the Wallace funding ended in 2011, experimenting with class formats, communication, and points of entry into ceramic art for younger audiences. For example, they have hosted events that bring finished ceramics into familiar settings, such as dining at a table set entirely in hand-crafted ceramics and serving farm-to-table foods and craft beverages.

COSTS

The work required new marketing capabilities, and major expenditures related to it included:

- **Research:** The focus group research had a budget of \$40,000, and the interviews with TCS visitors \$20,000.
- **Advertising:** Approximately \$90,000 was spent on new brochures and other promotional materials. TCS also relied heavily on local free online listings.
- **Marketing staff support:** About \$140,000 of the grant money was used to support marketing staff, which was necessary to oversee the research and the marketing overhaul and manage the new targeted communication streams. (TCS hired a director of marketing and public relations whose salary was covered in part from the Wallace funds.)

BOB HARLOW



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MINNESOTA

OPERA

A Non-traditional Partner Attracts a New Audience

By Bob Harlow



Founded in 1963, the [Minnesota Opera](#) is the nation's 11th-largest opera company. With an operating budget of \$10 million, it presents five to eight performances of five productions each season at the Ordway Center

for the Performing Arts in St. Paul.

THE CHALLENGE

Filling the middle-aged gap

In 2007, patrons over age 60 made up roughly half the audience at Minnesota Opera, and their high renewal rate suggested they were engaged and satisfied. Minnesota Opera also had programs to build relationships with young professionals, including their popular "Tempo" group for patrons ages 21 to 39 offering discount tickets and so-



Local radio host
Ian Punnett turned out to be
an opera magnet.

cial events. But there were no programs targeting middle-aged audiences. After determining, in 2007, that 70 percent of all tickets were purchased by women, but that only 16 percent of them were ages 35 to 60, Lani Willis, marketing and communications director at the time, took action.

Crisis Resolution=Opportunity Knocks

Willis wasn't thinking about long-term audience-building when she had to fill a sea of empty seats for a Tuesday night performance of an obscure work by an obscure composer (*The Fortunes of King Croesus* by Reinhard Keiser). She reached out to Ian Punnett, a local radio host at the time, whose show focused on pop culture, and who personally loved opera.

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That morning, he spoke of his fondness for the artform during drive time, the audience for which, the station had confirmed, was mostly professional women. He offered comp tickets to *The Fortunes*..., and gave away 500 of them, many to first-time operagoers.

Willis not only filled the house, she also made a serendipitous discovery: The opera novices thoroughly enjoyed themselves that night, even though they were not attending *Carmen*, *La Bohème*, or the handful of other operas seen as suitable for beginners. She hatched the idea of leveraging Punnett's rapport with his listeners over a longer time arc to build the opera's audience of women ages 35 to 60, using a combination of ticket giveaways (to eliminate financial barriers) and his ongoing banter about why he enjoyed opera, chipping away at perceptions of the artform as "stuffy" and "for other people."

A serendipitous partnership

Minnesota Opera applied for and received a four-year, \$750,000 Wallace Excellence Award from The Wallace Foundation to cover the following components of the partnership, launched midway through its 2008–09 season.

Step 1. Live endorsements

Punnett did an average of 20, live 60-second endorsements for each production—one every weekday morning beginning two

weeks before opening night and continuing until the last performance (productions typically open on a Saturday, followed by several shows over the next eight days). In his endorsements he looked for hooks with broad appeal, focusing on the timeless qualities of the story or its dramatic elements, and also showcased both the spectacle and the beauty of the music.

Step 2. Pre-recorded commercials

To expand his reach, Punnett made a 30-second commercial promoting each production to run during other shows on the station. Each ad ran 20- to 30-times-per-week for between two and seven weeks leading up to opening night.

Step 3. Ticket giveaways

Comp tickets were offered for Tuesday-night performances—which usually had the most available inventory—beginning midway through 2008–09 and continuing through the beginning of the 2012–13 season. On average, 75 callers received free tickets each time, mostly in pairs.

Step 4. Opera Insights

For those performances, Punnett co-hosted free, 30-minute pre-performance talks called "Opera Insights." He would continue the conversations he had begun on the radio, to help listeners feel more comfortable trying something unfamiliar.

Step 5. Partnership with "sister" station KSTP-TV

The partnership had two components.

- KSTP-TV produced and ran ads during the week that the upcoming season's tickets went on sale, in July. To promote a particular opera's run, it aired about 20 commercials during the preceding week.
- Like Punnett had, the station gave away Tuesday-night tickets, in this case to members of the studio audience at an afternoon local talk and variety show—everyone got one in a "goody bag." Listeners didn't have to request tickets, and the TV host didn't have a personal connection to opera, so redemption rates were relatively low: The first year, 81 percent of Punnett's listeners who got a pair of free tickets used them, compared to 39 percent of the TV studio audience. In the second year, 86 percent of Punnett's listeners redeemed



Artistic Director Dale Johnson and radio personality Ian Punnett hosting "Opera Insights."

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their tickets, compared to 25 percent for the KSTP-TV promotion, which was consequently phased out.

Punnett's rapport with listeners made a difference. Surveys with patrons showed that those who knew him saw him as more relatable than classical-music radio personalities. In focus groups, comp ticket recipients said that they felt he led them to the opera: Punnett was a "regular guy"; if he liked opera, they figured they might, too.

Continuing the momentum

Comp-ticket holders were moved to full-price tickets through a series of graduated offers. Those who redeemed tickets received invitations to attend the next opera for \$20. If they purchased, they were offered a half-price ticket for the next opera. A person who bought a half-price ticket was then offered a 25% discount on a subscription for the upcoming season. Those who didn't buy a subscription dropped back to the half-price ticket offer, and the cycle repeated for the next three operas. Once a patron purchased a subscription, she received a 10 percent discount offer to renew it. If she followed through, she was entered into the regular patron database.



Artistic Director Dale Johnson and radio personality Ian Punnett hosting "Opera Insights."

RESULTS

Minnesota Opera welcomes thousands of newcomers, but converting them to paying ticket buyers is slow

Over four seasons, Minnesota Opera gave away 3,560 tickets, mostly in pairs. They were redeemed by 1,485 households. Of those households, 1,114 (or 75 percent) were new to Minnesota Opera's database, and 48 percent of them returned to the opera. Nearly one-third came back on another free ticket, typically via a call-in on Punnett's show. A total of 198 households, or 18 percent of the total, came back as paying customers, spending \$201 on average over the first four seasons of the initiative. Of those 198 households:

- 163 households (15 percent of total) bought \$20 tickets
- 38 households (3 percent) bought half-price tickets
- 152 households (13 percent) bought other discounted tickets
- 129 households (11 percent) bought full-price tickets or subscriptions


When the stumbling block isn't price.

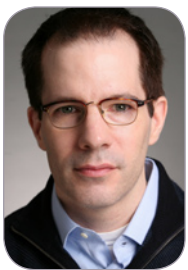
Focus groups with comp recipients identified a significant barrier to subsequent ticket purchases—and it wasn't price: Newcomers didn't know how to pick an opera. Focus group participants reviewing postcards and season brochures didn't recognize any of the opera titles, and there were no cues to help them figure out which one they might like. Unlike the ticket giveaway, Punnett wasn't there to tell them what they would enjoy. The result was inertia—comp ticket recipients repeatedly postponed making a decision, even when they had enjoyed their visit and wanted to return.

Minnesota Opera tried several tactics to guide new operagoers, including an online quiz to identify operas that matched personalities. Few used it, so they tried several other approaches, essentially simplifying the decision.

- **Offer fewer choices.** Instead of offering an array of subscription possibilities over several days at several price points, simpler offers such as three for \$75 have received a solid response.
- **A bargain in the house.** One of the company's most successful strategies has been prompting impulse buys of

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first-time subscriptions immediately following a performance, removing the possibility for postponing the decision. That offer is a half-price discount on first-time subscriptions announced before the final act of select performances, but audience members must buy the subscription before leaving. Minnesota Opera typically sells 100 new subscriptions per night of the offer, and a recent production of *Turandot* brought in 519 subscriptions over three nights. 



BOB HARLOW

Bob Harlow, PhD, is a veteran market researcher who has spent 20 years using surveys, focus groups, and advanced analytics to help organizations more deeply understand their target audiences. He currently leads [Bob Harlow Research and Consulting, LLC](#), a market research consulting organization.

COSTS

Major budget items included:

- **Promotion:** Radio advertising and endorsement fees and TV advertisements over four years (\$315,000), or approximately \$15,000 per production (\$9,000 per production for Punnett's live endorsements, prerecorded commercials, and appearances at Opera Insights, and \$6,000 for the TV commercials on KSTP-TV)
- **Administration:** A database administrator tracked and engaged comp-ticket recipients (\$175,000)
- **Research:** Survey and focus group to evaluate the program (\$70,000)
- **Discounting:** Defraying the cost of tickets given away (\$155,000)

This case-study summary is based on The Wallace Foundation's [Someone Who Speaks Their Language: How a Nontraditional Partner Brought New Audiences to Minnesota Opera](#).

Fleisher Art MEMORIAL

Staying Relevant in a Changing Neighborhood

By Bob Harlow

[Fleisher Art Memorial](#) provides free and low-cost classes to 4,000 youth and adults in Southeast Philadelphia, and free art instruction to 358 youth in public schools and community centers. Its galleries host over 8,000 visitors per year, and the organization has a budget of \$2 million. It was founded in 1898 by industrialist Samuel S. Fleisher to bring together people of diverse backgrounds around making art.



Despite its mission of inclusiveness, The Fleisher Memorial seemed inaccessible to audiences in its own backyard.

THE CHALLENGE

The institution hasn't changed, but the neighborhood has

In its early decades, Fleisher Art Memorial served many European immigrants in and around Southeast Philadelphia. By the end of the 20th century, however, demographics had shifted radically. Its immediate neighborhood had become home to Latin American, Chinese, and Southeast Asian immigrants and was a place of economic hardship. Its on-site programs were attended by an affluent population from outside the neighborhood. Fleisher served the former audience in off-site programs in schools and community centers, but its on-site patrons remained largely upper middle class. The discrepancy was apparent among staff managing both on-site and off-site programs, and it was disconcerting because it contradicted the founder's original mission.

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THE GOAL

Adapt the institution; diversify on-site audience

In the words of Director of Programs Magda Martinez, Fleisher needed to “rebalance” by attracting more people of the surrounding ethnically diverse neighborhood to its on-site programming. While it did not target specific groups, it did set a four-year goal to have one of every three students be from the surrounding area.

Step 1. Design programs and find funding to support them

The staff came up with ideas to attract audiences in their own backyard, including a summer camp, family workshops, and an after-school program. They applied for and received a \$320,000 award from The Wallace Foundation, to be used to hire personnel to coordinate the different activities, create collateral materials, and test and evaluate the new initiatives, over a period of four years (2008–11).

Step 2. Test the waters

In 2009, an outside firm was hired to conduct research among community leaders and students. While anticipating that they would use the information to refine their plans, staff made a disconcerting discovery. Fleisher was admired by its own students and members, but not well understood by the changing neighborhood. Even though many residents valued the arts, they neither knew nor cared about what Fleisher was, and it was unlikely they would attend any programs there. So staff shifted focus from creating new initiatives to better understanding the community and building relationships with it. The amount of the Wallace grant was increased by \$72,000, to expand research and data collection.



Director of Programs Magda Martinez recognized the need to “rebalance” Fleisher’s offerings.

Step 3: Go to the source

In summer 2010, Fleisher engaged [Slover Linett Audience Research](#) to conduct focus groups to identify how to build trust with and relevance to its own geographic community. The results indicated that many saw Fleisher as elitist, and as catering only to people interested in Western European art who had time and money to spare. They didn’t think they would fit in. From their perspective, there were three things that needed to be done for them to feel comfortable enough to attend:

- **Come to us.** Fleisher had to introduce itself to the community in familiar settings, such as festivals and other public events.
- **Show us.** Neighborhood residents didn’t understand what Fleisher does, and the course catalog didn’t speak their language; it was filled with terms unfamiliar (e.g., “silk screening”) to people with limited English and experience with the kind of art taught at Fleisher. They needed clearer, more accessible information, with photographs and demonstrations if possible.
- **Welcome us.** If they got over those hurdles and visited Fleisher, they needed to find a friendly, accommodating, and respectful staff.

Step 4. Prepare the internal culture

- **Set up visitor services function.** Fleisher had gotten an early start in 2008 when it created a new visitor services function, selecting and training staff who would provide a welcoming front-line presence. In the past, it was assumed that visitors would need minimal assistance, so people from various departments would take turns covering the front desk for a few hours at a time.
- **Train staff in cultural competency.** In summer 2010, the entire staff—from visitor services part-timers to the executive director—attended cultural competency training by an outside firm. There were seven four- to five-hour sessions over three days devoted to the interpretation of other cultures, self-awareness, and healthy communication strategies.
- **Engage with the community.** For 15 weeks in early 2011, staff attended workshops with leaders of local social-service agencies and visited neighborhood gathering places such as local markets, community centers, and places of worship.

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Fleisher's annual *Día de los Muertos* (Day of the Dead) celebration.

Step 5. Bring Fleisher programs into the neighborhood

At the same time, the organization expanded its practice of bringing art-making to different spaces. These are not so much “outreach” events as they are opportunities for community members to get a taste of the kinds of classes offered at Fleisher and feel comfortable enough to sign up for them. Neighborhood programs include:

- **ARTspiration!**, an annual street festival that takes over Fleisher’s block and an adjacent small park. Now nearing its tenth year, the event attracts hundreds of residents, over half



Attendees at the annual ARTspiration! festival create a mural in Fleisher’s parking lot.

from the surrounding neighborhood. Staff also makes the effort to bring in local vendors and artists.

- **ColorWheels**, a mobile studio that brings art-making to parks, festivals, and schools. The van carries equipment for printmaking, photography, drawing, painting, silk-screening, as well as folding chairs and tables, a pop-up tent, and Astroturf. Since its introduction in 2012, ColorWheels has annually served more than 1,000 community members in approximately 25 public events.

ColorWheels has been a regular presence, for instance, in Mifflin Square Park, a gathering place for residents of various ethnic backgrounds with a recent history of tension. Over four Saturdays in spring and early summer 2012, 142 children, teens, and adults took part.

- **FAMbassadors** are community residents who facilitate a two-way conversation—with neighborhood residents about Fleisher, and with Fleisher about community needs and partnership opportunities. A recently created paid part-time position at Fleisher, three FAMbassadors now act as part community liaisons, part community advisors.

Step 6. Changes to on-site curriculum

While Fleisher staff believes it is more important first to develop relationships and modify curriculum later, there have been



ColorWheels at a Saturday Young Artists Program, free for ages five through 18.

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program changes to attract different ethnic groups. For instance, Fleisher added faculty to teach Nigerian and Ghanaian pottery on a regular basis, and recently introduced *Dibujo Básico* (Basic Drawing), specifically intended for Spanish-speaking students. Its first bilingual offering typically reaches full enrollment, as do the Nigerian pottery and Ghanaian pottery classes.

RESULTS

Changing perceptions, more visitors and students from surrounding neighborhood

Visitor surveys from 2009 and 2012 show that Fleisher has made progress in moving away from the image of elitism and in tailoring its programs to serve local residents, immigrants, and non-English speakers. According to a [RAND Corporation study](#) that is considered one of the most comprehensive evidence-based frameworks for audience building in the arts, changing perceptions is the most critical step in attracting more diverse audiences.

The school also has made headway in encouraging more residents from local neighborhoods to take classes: One-quarter of the students in on-site classes and workshops now come from there, up from one-fifth, and teens and children from that area now constitute 36 percent of Fleisher's on-site youth programs, up from 25 percent.

Still, the work has just begun. As audience diversification expert Donna Walker-Kuhne has noted, it can take as much as a decade for new relationships to become strong enough so that new target audiences begin coming on their own. 



BOB HARLOW

Bob Harlow, PhD, is a veteran market researcher who has spent 20 years using surveys, focus groups, and advanced analytics to help organizations more deeply understand their target audiences. He currently leads [Bob Harlow Research and Consulting, LLC](#), a market research consulting organization.

This case-study summary is based on The Wallace Foundation's [Staying Relevant in a Changing Neighborhood: How Fleisher Art Memorial is Adapting to Shifting Community Demographics](#).



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NETWORK

New World Symphony's

WALLCAST

Planting the Seeds of Future Audiences

By John Fleming

Capitalizing on the warm climes of its home, the [New World Symphony](#) is attacking the challenge of audience development by basically turning itself inside out. Opened in 2011, the Frank Gehry designed New World Center is part bricks-and-mortar (and lots of glass) and part greenspace—also known as SoundScape—where the orchestra projects free HD videos outside of live performances in its 756-seat concert hall. The images are shown on a 7,000-square-foot wall adjacent to the building for all the world, including passers-by, to enjoy at no cost.



A live Wallcast of the New World Symphony in action.

The orchestra, comprised of recent conservatory graduates known as “fellows,” offers 85 performances a year, ten of which are “Wallcast.” The sound is remarkably good, thanks to an elaborate system of 167 loudspeakers and subwoofers. The average estimated attendance for the 10 simulcasts in 2015-16 was more than 2,000 each.

A new kind of concert-goer

Many of the people at Wallcasts are newcomers to classical music, according to a 2014-15 audience research report by the consulting group [WolfBrown](#). They are generally more reflective of Miami's ethnic

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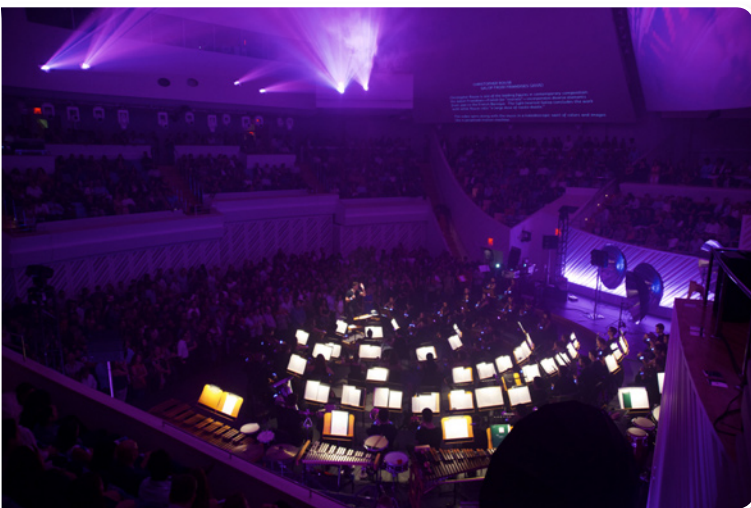
and socioeconomic diversity than conventional NWS audiences, and they are younger.

- 34 percent of the Wallcast audience identifies as a person of color, compared to just 12 percent at regular NWS concerts. (For an estimated 60 percent of the Miami Beach population, Spanish is its first language.)
- 30 percent is under age 45; 40 percent is 45 to 65; and 30 percent is over 65.
- Less than 50 percent make \$100,000 or more. About 20 percent make \$50,000 or less.
- On a given night, 30 percent are attending their first Wallcast, and more than 75 percent have never purchased a ticket to a NWS concert.

“We are bringing new people to this art form,” New World CEO Howard Herring says. “And we’re bringing them with an experience that is social and comfortable and inviting. Yet there is no diminishment of the power of classical music. You get this full-on artistic statement, and you get to sit in your polo shirt and shorts.”

In praise of alternative formats

Alan Brown, co-author of the WolfBrown report, points to the Wallcasts as an example of the new approach to audience building. He calls it “recontextualizing the art in a different setting to free people from negative preconceptions.



The NWS concert hall during a Pulse program.

“New World accepts that music is a visual experience for people who grew up with MTV and YouTube,” says Brown. NWS favors other off-beat formats as well, such as its late-night Pulse programs that turn the concert hall into a hot nightclub with specially designed lighting effects, a DJ spinning electronica, and orchestra members playing edgy works by the likes of Ligeti and Glass. The hall is dominated by large, curved acoustic “sails” above and around the stage that double as projection surfaces.



Howard Herring, CEO of the New World Symphony.

“More formats, more people, more penetration into the community, more donors. That’s how we see the future.”

“Each of our alternate formats has developed its own audience,” Herring says. “Like a stroke of lightning it hit us that the future is not about a progression toward a traditional format,” adding, however, that there’s no reason to drop the traditional format. “We have a strong audience for that. They love it, we love them. But the future is a progression toward multiple audiences. If you have four or five formats, each with its own audience, you are way better off. More formats, more people, more penetration into the community, more donors. That’s how we see the future.”

It’s not about ticket buyers

In many ways, Herring suggests, directly cultivating ticket sales is beside the point, noting the sponsorship of Wallcasts by Citibank. “People ask what our return on investment is,” he says. “Well, we are building a new audience, and some of them will be ticket buyers, and some of them will not be. But what also happens is that Citi wants access to our audience and our brand, so they are willing to be a sponsor.”

“Tripping over things you love”

Brown especially likes the serendipity of the simulcasts, which attract many passersby to SoundScape, a short stroll from the boutiques, sidewalk cafes, and art deco hotels in the trendy section of South Beach (aka SoBe). “Michael Tilson Thomas [co-founder and artistic director of NWS] talks about random

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encounters with music," he says. "You kind of trip over things you love. When you discover something like a new piece of music, it can move you in powerful ways. But you can't plan it. So people might show up for a Wallcast and hear, say, something by Berlioz, and say, 'Oh, my God, what is that?' Seeds are sown, but they may not sprout for years. And they may not manifest in ticket buying in the short term. But if you don't do it, you're damned. You have to plant the seeds."

Meanwhile, back in the control room...

The Wallcasts use at least 10 robotic cameras and are including more and more pre-produced content. Clyde Scott, director of video production, has done about 70 simulcasts in his 13 years with NWS. They've grown increasingly complex, from about 300 camera cues in the beginning to about 500 today. People in the park get views of the musicians they would not get in the concert hall. For example, in April's performance of Dutilleux's *A Whole Distant World*, a little camera was attached to the end pin of

OUTDOOR LIVE SIMULCASTS EVERYWHERE

The New World Center was designed specifically to enable outdoor viewing of indoor programs, but it is not the only arts group taking the al fresco route. The Detroit Symphony projects Maxcasts (named for the Max M. Fisher Music Center) on the side of Orchestra Hall, such as November's performance of Tod Machover's celebration of the city, *Symphony in D*. The Charlotte (NC) Symphony and Pacific (CA) Symphony offer Plazacasts. The Metropolitan Opera has long simulcast its opening nights outdoors, in Lincoln Center Plaza and Times Square. San Francisco Opera simulcasts in AT&T Park and Dallas Opera projected its staging of *Show Boat* in April in AT&T Stadium.



John Forsyte, president of the Pacific Symphony.

"It's a big deal for us," says John Forsyte, president of the Pacific Symphony, whose simulcast is projected on a large screen in the plaza outside the orchestra's venue, Segerstrom Concert Hall in Costa Mesa. "We've been drawing from 2,000 to 3,000 people."

Pacific Symphony's annual Plazacast—the first was in 2012—is the centerpiece of a community festival that runs for several hours leading up to the concert and features food trucks, visual art displays, amateur musicians, and dance performances. "It's not so much done in the spirit of audience development but in the spirit of community service," says Forsyte of the simulcast, whose cost, which he estimates at \$40,000, is underwritten by the Irvine Foundation. This year's program in early June featured Beethoven's *Piano Concerto No. 5*, with soloist Andre Watts, and Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique*.

"Fundamentally, the orchestra has a mission, which is to expand the number of people engaging with the art form, and that doesn't just happen when somebody buys a ticket," Forsyte says. "So our case for philanthropic support is enhanced when we have more people attending. With the Plazacast, we basically double our audience that night."



Clyde Scott, director of video production for NWS.

soloist Anssi Karttunen's cello, enabling a shot that looked up the fingerboard and into the soloist's face.

"I try to engage the audience visually on several levels," Scott says. "We have cameras fairly high up, looking down 30 feet or so. We have cameras that are almost at eye level with the musicians. And I'm interested in exploring the third level, which is these little cameras that give you a very strange and interesting perspective of the musicians and their instruments." Over the next few years, NWS hopes to upgrade the simulcast system from HD to 4K video, which will increase image resolution almost fourfold.

From the control booth in the hall, Scott is able to change visuals on the fly to keep in sync with the performance. Imagery of Picasso's painting *Guernica* and the rose windows of Chartres Cathedral complemented sections of Honegger's anti-war Third Symphony. Video created for Cage's *The Seasons* was incorporated into a Wallcast. The 2015 premiere of Michael Gordon's *El Sol Caliente* featured a film by Bill Morrison.



New World Symphony Wallcast audiences can reach 2,000 on a given night.

JOHN FLEMING



John Fleming writes for Classical Voice North America, Opera News, and other publications. For 22 years, he covered the Florida music scene as performing arts critic of the Tampa Bay Times.

VIOLINIST AS TV STAR

Wallcasts often help to establish a personal connection between audiences and musicians. NWS Executive VP and Provost John Kieser cites the experience of Rebecca Reale, the soloist in Mozart's Violin Concerto No. 5 in a February simulcast. "She came outside at intermission, and all of a sudden, spontaneously, the audience started clapping and pushed forward to try to talk with her," Kieser says. "People become fans and get attached to these musicians."

COSTS

Herring acknowledges that labor costs for Wallcasts are "huge," with 11 people working on sound and video and projections, plus a production crew of 10. The capital investment in infrastructure (cameras, projectors, sound, software, etc.) was \$8.5 million, and operating expenses are \$10,000 per Wallcast. But the flashy, futuristic nature of the experience is central in appealing to younger audiences. "That's the secret of it," Herring says. "The high-tech delivery. We're in a digital world."

MANHATTAN

\$30 Theatre Club TICKETS for -YEAR-OLDS

By Nancy Malitz



Founded in 1970, [Manhattan Theatre Club](#) has grown from an off-off-Broadway showcase into a versatile on- and off-Broadway producer with 19 Tony Awards and six Pulitzer Prizes, a subscriber base of 20,000, and a reputation for exciting new work. It typically offers eight plays in its two theaters. The “30 Under 30” campaign, offering \$30 tickets to people 30 and under, has been among its most successful audience development initiatives.

THE CHALLENGE

Declining subscription base, the Crash of '08

“At the time of the Crash of 2008, we were five years into having a Broadway theater in our mix,” says Barry Grove, who is in his 41st year as executive producer of the Manhattan Theater Club. “Prior to that, 80 percent of our audiences were subscribers, but we had also entered this other world of the single ticket audience.

“Meanwhile, national surveys were tracking the trend of subscrip-



Manhattan Theatre Club
Executive Producer
Barry Grove.

tions declining on a gentle slope. It was never again going to be like the old days when 15,000 to 16,000 people subscribed to everything. It was becoming ‘make your own package,’ and smaller packages, and flex passes, and a mix of Broadway on and off, and the need to balance that out. But it was the Crash that brought the urgency.”

THE GOAL

Bring audiences back, attract young professionals

Director of Marketing Debra Waxman and her team were looking at two goals: Getting people back after the Crash and finding a younger crowd. “We had programs for students in the 15-20 age range but not so much in that next age-group up,” she says. “We set a goal to target young professionals in their late 20s and 30s

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who have moved to New York and want to enjoy the culture but don't necessarily have all the financial resources."

Focus Group: In late 2008, Waxman turned to MTC's 18 interns and created an informal focus group. Among her questions:

- Why are you interested in theater?
- How do you choose what show to go to?
- Where do you look for your information?
- Do you read newspapers?
- What would be a price point you could afford?
- What are the obstacles to attending a show?

Price was one obstacle, Waxman found, but so was getting up at six a.m. and sitting on a sidewalk just to get a cheap rush ticket. Emerging professionals, MTC learned, are busy people.



MTC Marketing Director
Debra Waxman.

30 Under 30 launch

Staff responded quickly to the interns' input; within a month, the idea for the 30 Under 30 campaign was presented to Grove and General Manager Florie Seery. "Everybody was on board from the beginning," says Waxman.

The terms

- **\$30 tickets for people 30 and under:** A code is emailed to members for upcoming shows and dates, redeemable for one pair of \$30 tickets to every MTC production.
- **Free to join.** Membership is valid until Dec. 31 of the year you turn 31.
- **Easy to follow:** "You have to prove your age to join," says Waxman, "but after that, if tickets are available, they're available," any night, any seat.
- **Easy to plan ahead.** This is not student rush.
- **Older companions allowed,** but 30 Under 30 member must pick up the tickets, with I.D.

Getting the word out

MTC's focus-group participants made it clear they didn't respond to direct mail, radio spots, or newspaper ads, which was just as well,

because there was no money in the budget for marketing the new program anyway. "It was going to have to be completely digital outreach," Waxman says. "But all we had to work with at the time was an email list of students who had been buying student rush tickets. So, we started with them."

The usual challenges of time and money turned out to be serendipitous:

- **MTC had to manage the program in-house.** "As it turned out, it was not expensive to run," says Waxman, adding that her marketing staff hasn't grown since 1999.
- **Email lessons were learned** by trial and error: "The tolerance for frequency turned out to be every two weeks," says Waxman. "If we sent more than that, the email backfired and the members wouldn't engage."
- **The social media explosion** was happening in 2009 and MTC needed to learn the drill. Facebook was just beginning to mushroom at 150 million users. (It's at 1.65 billion as of April 2016.)

RESULTS

The 30 Under 30 program launched with 325 names on the email list; it now has 16,000.

- What started with email and Facebook is now also on Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube, with additional promotions on the MTC web site. Members are generating their own buzz: "Stagedoor and marquee shots are hugely popular," says Waxman.
- The lowest response for a single 30 Under 30 email pitch was in the first year, with 35 tickets sold. The most was 3,925. "The program has been great for us," Waxman says. "And great for the performers. They tell us they can feel the energy in the house."
- The ticket price has remained unchanged in seven years, at \$30, even though ticket prices have escalated from \$75 to \$150. "It turned out to be a really accessible price point," Waxman says. "We think of it as making an investment in our audience for the future. We don't even look at it as a discount, rather as one of the prices we offer."
- With an eye to longer-term audience development, MTC now offers at least one 30 Under 30 party night for each of

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its productions, where wine and beer and finger food are provided in the lobby, and sometimes the artists come to mingle. Members of 30 Plus and Young Patrons (see adjacent column) are also invited.

And for those over 30 but under...

30 Plus: Spinning off 30 Under 30, MTC has announced a new program that caters to the 30 to 35 age group, which requires a three-show minimum at \$45 a ticket, with a second subscription available at the same price.

THE ACTORS TAKE TO SOCIAL MEDIA



Constellations was a hit with the 30 Under 30 group, thanks to the actors' willingness to use their own social-media accounts.

but it could not be extended, because both stars were heading into high-profile projects with firm start dates.


"Jake and Ruth came to us," says Marketing Director Debra Waxman. "They told us they'd be willing to do a ninth performance in each of the final three weeks if we made a lot of the tickets available to this younger audience that has been so great for us." The actors broke the news themselves, via Jake's iPhone on Instagram, that a thousand tickets would be on sale at \$30, solely to 30 Under 30 members. The tickets were gone in 24 hours.



Screen shot of Jack Gyllenhaal's Instagram post with costar Ruth Wilson.

A huge stimulus for the 30-under-30 crowd has turned out to be the actors themselves. Many are heavy social-media users, members of the target age group, and eager to stay in touch with their fans. MTC's *Constellations*, a two-character drama about love and higher physics by Nick Payne, featured film and TV stars Jake Gyllenhaal (*Brokeback Mountain*) and Ruth Wilson (BBC's *Luther* and *Jane Eyre*) in their Broadway debuts. It was a huge hit, selling out almost immediately,



Young Patrons: MTC's development department recently went to work on a Young Patrons program (ages 18 to 39) with social gatherings and donor perks. "The regular scale basically runs from \$2,500 for a couple up to \$25,000 with a tax-deductible component and benefits increasing, such as best seats in the house," Grove explained. 



NANCY MALITZ

Nancy Malitz is the publisher of the web magazine [Chicago On the Aisle](#) and an editor of the web site [Classical Voice North America](#). She was the founding music critic at USA Today and the first director of new media for The Detroit News. She has written about the arts for a variety of national publications.

CHICAGO

THEATRE WEEK

The Collaborative Approach to Audience Development

By Nancy Malitz



Founded in 1979 as an alliance to promote, support, and advocate for Chicago's theater industry, the [League of Chicago Theatres](#) (LCT) leverages the collective strength of more than 200 theater companies ranging from small storefront operations to major cultural centers with multi-million dollar budgets.

THE CHALLENGE

Frigid February in the Windy City is a hard sell when it comes to coaxing Chicagoans from their homes, let alone out-of-towners. "The one thing that unites all our member theaters is that we need butts in seats," says LCT Executive Director Deb Clapp. The League looked to the ever-burgeoning success of Chicago's city-wide Restaurant Week, launched in 2008, for inspiration. People ap-



League of Chicago Theatres
Executive Director Deb Clapp.

parently loved the idea of choosing among defined (bargain) price points (\$22, \$33, or \$44) to dine on multi-course menus created by top chefs.

THE GOAL



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Using Restaurant Week’s five-year success story, the League decided to create its own limited-time-only campaign, offering tickets at fixed prices. With a goal launch date of 2013, it sought and received funding from the city’s newly streamlined tourism arm, called [Choose Chicago](#), which built and hosted a Chicago Theatre Week page on its own web site.

Chicago Theatre Week launch



The terms

- Two price points only, \$15 and \$30. The goal was to emulate Restaurant Week’s simple formula.
- Each theater chose its own level of participation, including inventory and seat locations.
- Theatre Week would piggy-back onto Restaurant Week. “Restaurants wanted to avoid Valentine’s Day, which was the one day in February they were inundated,” Clapp says. “So, they chose their week first, and then we ran our promotion after it.” (The 2013 dates were Feb. 1-10 for restaurants and 12-17 for theaters, but they vary from year to year.)

Staffing and getting the word out

- The Theatre Week program required the full-time attention of one League staffer for four to five months of the year to coordinate the theaters’ efforts, with all six of the League’s full-time staff jumping in during the weeks leading up to the campaign.
- The League used its own email lists to individual broadcast, print, and web journalists.
- Restaurants were asked to include a Theatre Week postcard in their check-folders.

- With little else going on in February after the Super Bowl, the media lavished attention on Chicago Theatre Week. Clapp, armed with video clips from the shows, received generous airtime on the local talk-show circuit.

Chicago Theatre Week Statistics

	Participating organizations	Tickets sold	Productions offered	Number of individual performances
2013	70	6,200	97	330
2014	92	7,000	100	344
2015	100	9,400	116	575
2016	106	10,500	124	666

RESULTS

- In February 2013, 70 theater companies participated, selling 6,200 value-priced tickets to 330 performances of 97 different shows.
- In February 2016, the fourth season, 106 participating organizations sold more than 10,500 value-priced tickets to 666 performances of 124 different productions.
- An average of 63 percent of attendees were new to their respective theaters.
- 17 percent were out-of-towners, up from four percent in 2014.
- Theatre Week’s popularity prompted some Restaurant Week participants, especially those near theaters, to quietly extend their own prix-fixe promotions.
- The Lyric Opera of Chicago and the Joffrey Ballet are part of Chicago Theatre Week and, along with numerous other arts organizations, have joined the League of Chicago Theatres.

“It’s an ecosystem in which we all play a role.” Clapp says. “Arts audiences are going to be crossover audiences.”

NANCY MALITZ



Nancy Malitz is the publisher of the web magazine [Chicago On the Aisle](#) and an editor of the web site [Classical Voice North America](#). She was the founding music critic at USA Today and the first director of new media for The Detroit News. She has written about the arts for a variety of national publications.

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PUBLISHED BY

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