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Follow-Up Report
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INTRODUCTION

Theatre Communications Group (TCG)’s Audience (R)Evolution program, a multi-year project funded by the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, studies, promotes, and supports successful audience engagement and community development strategies in the U.S. not-for-profit theatre. The program has grown to include reports, case studies, convenings, grants, blogs, and videos, all available on the TCG website.

Behind this remarkably diverse series of initiatives at TCG, its partners, and member theatres lies a core-value emphasis on “risk-taking, reflection, experimentation, and collective action toward implementing new strategies” that were originally intended to help theatres cultivate and maintain attendance and have since grown to emphasize building deep, long-term relationships with audiences as well as demand.

Round One of the program took place from 2012 to 2015. TCG engaged AMS Planning & Research, a national arts management consulting firm, to create a report based on field surveys and a series of case studies spotlighting audience development strategies identified by AMS at eight theatre companies. The goal of the report was to develop a shared vocabulary around audience engagement; explore audience engagement models and understand how/why the best ones work; and share these successful models with the field. (AMS defined “audience engagement” to include any effort by a theatre to connect to its constituency/ies, sometimes through multiple pathways, with a desire to enhance the experience they share.)

The eight original companies were selected by TCG based, in part, on groups that were cited as “best practice” organizations by their peer companies and through the extensive AMS research of the field. Each company incorporated audience engagement and community development as a fundamental component of their service delivery and institutional mission. They represent a variety of geographic locations, institutional sizes, and producing/presenting models.

I joined the project in 2013, working in conjunction with the TCG staff to prepare the AMS report for publication. The case studies, along with an executive summary, became a useful resource both within the U.S. professional not-for-profit theatre community and beyond. TCG soon commissioned and posted translations into Arabic, French, Mandarin, Portuguese, and Spanish.

For this follow-up report, I reached out to seven of the eight original theatres. Much has changed in the five years since the case studies were published. Programs have continued, or fallen to the wayside; staff has turned over, or remained in place. Many of the showcased initiatives still exist, while others have evolved through refinement and experimentation. Some have been fully replaced. But in every case, the underlying imperatives are still in force. In other words, the strategies persist, even as the tactics may have morphed or been completely reinvented. What I found most exciting about this project is that while the theatre leaders and specialists I spoke with were generally happy to look back on their work as described more than five years ago, they are focused on NOW. They are enthusiastic to talk about what audience engagement strategies are working for them, and what needs to be worked on; how to sustain this work, and how to improve it.

1 As of the autumn of 2018, the eighth company, Arkansas Repertory Theatre, is navigating a significant financial crisis, having laid off two thirds of its staff and suspended production. The company is working to refocus and rebuild. Fingers crossed!
In addition to checking in with the companies included in the original case studies, I began conversations with leaders of an additional pair of theatres selected by TCG—Hattiloo Theatre in Memphis, TN; and Trinity Repertory Company in Providence, RI. Additional documents in this report include a look at the two organizations’ audience engagement and community development work by way of mini-reports that take a somewhat more informal approach than the AMS case studies.

Five years now have passed since the case studies were released—an eternity in the arts world. And much has changed within society since 2013. In an era of disruption and polarization, theatres are responding to questions like, “What is truth?” and, “Whom can you trust?” and, “Who has the power—and how are they held accountable for its abuse?” With the concept of “fake news” figuring prominently in the national consciousness, it’s fair to ask: Where does authenticity live on our stages, and in cultural creation? How can theatre companies continue to engage their audiences through relationships based on trust—especially as social media becomes an ever-more important communications platform? How can theatre companies give voice to those individuals who have been marginalized, who are otherwise shut out of the larger cultural conversation?

The good news is that no art form is better positioned to help engaged audiences navigate these turbulent times. Theatre may be an analog activity in the digital age, but as the updated case studies and new ones make abundantly clear, the theatres’ audience engagement work is more essential and exciting than ever before.

**CASE STUDIES: FIVE YEARS ON**

What you will find in the pages that follow is a theatre-by-theatre look at the companies whose audience engagement strategies were profiled in the original case studies, based on interviews with key staff members during the summer of 2018. You’ll be able to see how their work in this area continues today. I’ve noted specific strategies that have changed or been replaced by new initiatives; as well as key organizational developments and staff changes.

Some of the strategies described in the case studies are broad, organizational mandates; others are narrow, spotlighting particular programs. As a rule, the broader the strategy, the more likely that it remains in place. Keep in mind that the companies vary widely in practice; audience development looks very different at each organization. It’s a broad spectrum of diverse practices, ranging from season- and venue-based resident theatres, to companies that do all or most of their work by inviting members of the community to create and share their stories outside of traditional theatre buildings.
HERE ARTS CENTER, NEW YORK, NY

View original case study

**Strategy 1** – Create multiple points of contact, real and virtual, between resident artists and the greater HERE community. *This strategy is still in place.*

**Strategy 2** – Focus on building community partnerships, including co-production with other cultural organizations. Building on the work described in the case study, the company has created PROTOTYPE, a large, new co-production initiative that has generated major new work both within the company’s local geographical area and beyond.

**Strategy 3** – Streamline the ticket-buying process. The “Ticket Revolution” concept lasted for only one season, but the company still offers affordable tickets and continues to pursue dynamic pricing strategies.

**Strategy 4** – Build online and on-site opportunities simultaneously. *This strategy is ever-present, although the methods change and adapt frequently.*

**Strategy 5** – Construct opportunities geared to specific patron demographics. *This practice still exists.*

Looking back on the work described in the original case study, HERE Founding Artistic Director Kristin Marting summarizes the changes that have taken place over the past five years as follows: The company is investing more deeply in fewer artists and creating a more thoughtful engagement strategy surrounding each production. This might involve audience-building; curating an online life of the show; providing different kinds of support for artists as they engage with audiences through digital media; and even fundraising. The company has also devoted significant resources to a new festival that involves large-scale productions in venues around the city.

**Co-Production Via PROTOTYPE**

The original case study focused on work during the 2012–2013 season, including a strategy involving co-production. Immediately thereafter in 2013, HERE launched PROTOTYPE, an opera-theatre festival co-produced with Beth Morrison Projects. Now in its seventh season, PROTOTYPE has become what Associate Artistic Director & Marketing Director Amanda Szeglowski calls, “a massive undertaking [that] has greatly altered HERE’s staff time allocations and organizational focus.”

The festival has yielded multiple collaborations with venue partners over time. What’s more, the scale of the festival has increased, and it’s now too large for a single organization to manage on its own. This growth has expanded not just the artistic reach of the theatre (it “affords a higher level of funding and excellence,” says Marting), but its audience base as well, increasing the number and diversity of people and institutions the company engages with. Collaborations now include venue partnerships with producing, presenting, and academic theatres in Manhattan and Brooklyn. Different partners bring different resources to the table. “It’s important to negotiate relationships that are mutually beneficial, and helpful to share marketing resources,” says Marting.

I asked about the strategy of developing deep relationship within the theatre’s neighborhood. Hudson Square, an enclave of SoHo, has experienced rapid, ongoing changes in demography and commercial activity. The PROTOTYPE Festival is citywide, Marting explains, but still centered at HERE and thus SoHo-based. The theatre’s leaders continue to maintain deep local civic involvement, serving on the community board, the local business improvement district, and other groups. “Partnerships ebb and flow,” she says, but the underlying strategy persists. The company strives for high visibility in the civic life of the neighborhood, while working with local business including bars, restaurants, etc. (see below) in addition to peer arts organizations.
Digital Outreach and In-person Engagement

HERE continues to value using technology and in-person encounters to create multiple points of contact between artists and audience members throughout the development of new work, and in its final form on HERE’s stages. The company experiments and adapts as digital media changes, and as artists explore new platforms. “Trying to drive people to our website wasn’t working,” says Marting. The site was originally intended to be a “hub of activity,” she says. But soon enough the company realized that internet use has evolved, with consumers relying more on social media than on web surfing to engage with online content.

So HERE took a new approach: “We now encourage artists to use their own channels and interact with their own constituencies,” says Marting. “Artists don’t need to do yet another blog post [for us].” They are already creating online content on their own, whether through text, video, sound, or a combination of all three. HERE still positions itself as a hub for connecting artists with patrons in cyberspace as well as in their theatre, but the way the company does this is evolving. Szeglowski explains, “We’re culling information from artists and linking out to it, synching to things the artists [already] do.”

HERE’s production-specific engagement work is not limited to web-based activity. “What we do still evolves based on every project,” Szeglowski offers. “We try to come up with something digital and something analog for every show, something that has an organic connection to the show.” An example: For a hip hop-driven project, the company tacked large sheets of paper on the theatre’s front door and invited patrons to “tag” them. For one show, HERE invited patrons to visit a photo booth in the theatre lobby; for another, the lobby offered patrons “look books” of images related to the production.

During lengthy developmental processes, the theatre invites audience feedback at various points throughout. These might include post-performance discussions, written feedback, conversations using Liz Lerman’s critical Response Process, or even free-for-alls, depending on what the artist wants. Audiences can see work multiple times before it’s completed with its premiere.

HERE’s “Five for Five” video project, which is mentioned in the case study, continues to invite five audience members to give one-minute, in-the-moment responses to shows, and HERE posts the videos online. But even within this straightforward engagement platform, HERE is constantly adjusting, refining, and reinventing. “It’s always changing,” says Marting. “We’re always trying to be more effective, dumping things that don’t work, and experimenting with new ones.”

The company’s website figured large in the case study. As of the summer of 2018, the site is in the midst of a major redesign. Szeglowski gave me a preview in an email: “Streamlined ticketing will get a major boost, artist interaction will step into this decade and allow for new technology integration, and there will be a home for our community/business partnerships. We will also be able to highlight all of our onsite and online initiatives more clearly and give a better picture of who we are. Once people can visit our site and have a user-friendly experience, they will hopefully feel that we have their needs in mind and want to engage with us more often and on a deeper level.”

Meanwhile, the theatre has increased the amount of content on its website—a rough estimate is that it has quadrupled over the past five years. They still position the site as both a resource for artists and an engagement platform for audiences, so that artists can send people to HERE.org to find out more about them and their work. The new site will be more user-friendly, with an emphasis on patrons being able to access artists’ media on whatever channels it is housed.
“Everyone is moving to a more user-focused, on-demand approach to serving customers/patrons,” Szeglowski writes. “We are no longer the only ones out there wanting to have new technology and an interactive audience/artist platform. We are still very good listeners and observers though, and are committed to being the ‘Madonna’ of downtown theatre—reinventing ourselves again and again so we stay fresh and relevant to our base.”

As content shifts to social media, the theatre’s website remains its primary platform for ticket sales. The strategy of streamlining the ticket-buying process is ongoing. HERE continues to explore and experiment with dynamic pricing, as do many companies. The Ticket Revolution program described in the case study didn’t work as the theatre leadership had hoped. Cost, it turns out, was less of a disincentive than they thought it would be. So rather than focus on a $10 ticket price point, they have refined the promotion to stress what makes the work unique and compelling.

The case study focused on dynamic pricing and mobile ticketing. The company continues to experiment with dynamic pricing, but generally now in just two ways: Previews are cheaper, while premium tickets come with associated perks including reserved seats, no waiting in line at the box office, and so on. Revenue from premium tickets enables the company to support affordable ticket prices for other audience segments.

But the energy on ticket sales has shifted elsewhere—to sophisticated online marketing tools. “Our ticket strategies are informed by what our peers are doing,” says Marting. Like many companies, HERE has largely abandoned print in favor of targeted online advertising, with much success. The theatre is experimenting with retargeting, seeking out “lookalikes,” and so on. These efforts have helped the company better understand who is buying tickets. “Targeting yields sales,” says Szeglowski. It’s easy to measure, to know what works and what doesn’t, unlike blanket-style ads in any medium. Sophisticated targeting, now primarily a marketing platform, gives the company a degree of control over the marketplace that did not exist at the time of the case study.

The company continues to create events for specific demographics such as young patrons and college alumni groups associated with an artist involved in the show, and to offer free student rush tickets. When targeting millennials, the new emphasis is on making theatergoing into an “event” evening, which, says Szeglowski, is what millennials want—and so the theatre offers tie-ins with local bars and restaurants.

I asked about how HERE measures the success of its audience engagement activity. “Success, as always, is represented by ticket sales, online engagement, survey feedback, and peoples’ general enthusiasm and care for HERE as an organization,” offers Szeglowski. “Are donations increasing? Are our shows winning awards? Are the press attending and are the reviews positive? I don’t think the measurements of success have changed, but we are constantly reviewing where we stand with respect to these issues and reevaluating our processes.”

**Cast Changes** - The strategic team leaders of this work are still in place at HERE, though the company reports that their associates and assistants have “turned over many times.” In Szeglowski’s words, “This makes follow-through an issue and adds a time-suck element as there is constant need for training and knowledge handoff. On the positive side, new staff has brought new ideas and approaches to these ongoing strategies.”
Strategy 1 – Create affordable price points to Long Wharf Theatre’s productions so that productions are open to all socioeconomic backgrounds.

Strategy 2 – Increase participants’ direct access to artists.

Strategy 3 – Partner with a nearby assisted living center.

All of these strategies remain central to Long Wharf’s practice, though the tactics that implement them have evolved. The case study examined three of the specific programs through which the theatre carried out these strategies:

1. “SPARK” welcomes a small group of interested theatregoers to participate in all of the stages of the new-play development process, from workshop to opening night. This program is now seen primarily as an enhancement program rather than an engagement strategy; it is currently on hold.

2. Stage. Page. Engage. offers a theatre and literacy program in collaboration with the New Haven Free Public Library. Long Wharf has continued and expanded its long-term partnership with the library system.

3. Elder Play Project engages senior citizens to write their own plays, using Long Wharf’s productions as a touchstone and inspiration. The success of this program is indicated not just by its longevity, but also by its use as a model for other LWT audience engagement strategies.

Community engagement remains at the heart of Long Wharf Theatre (LWT)’s practice, according to Managing Director Joshua Borenstein. The theatre remains focused on “removing barriers—so that anyone who is intellectually curious about theatre can participate.” The company is working to give more people a sense of ownership of its work on stage and beyond, and of the theatergoing experience in general.

**Engagement Through Storytelling**

The Elder Play Project, which engages senior citizens to write their own stories using LWT’s productions as a touchstone and inspiration, has thrived in the time since the case study, Borenstein reports. An internal adjustment moved the program from the Education Department (whose focus is now kindergarten through college) to a new Community Engagement Department, which concentrates on lifelong learning.

The model has been a success, and Long Wharf is now replicating it with other groups. “People want support to create work. They want to tell their own stories,” says Borenstein, citing a trend familiar to many who work in the arts. “We’re doing more of that kind of storytelling.”

An example: LWT’s Newcomer Play Project came about through a partnership with Integrated Refugee & Immigrant Services (IRIS), a local refugee/resettlement organization in New Haven. Borenstein describes it as a big success, a “moving and transformative experience” that invited migrants and refugees to tell their stories, which became a performance event open to the whole community. Participants shared their stories in English, rather than their first languages, to connect with the larger community, Borenstein says. The initial event sold out. It was held during the Muslim holy period of Ramadan and included a post-show “break-fast.” The program generated a lot of press, as well as mingling between participants and Long Wharf staff, patrons, and others in the community. “Theatre is a space of power. Putting their stories on our stage is a way of showing that their stories matter,” says Borenstein. One key element that makes this program work is that “people are drawn to the authenticity” of the performer/participants, he said, making the comparison to the popular public radio storytelling series *The Moth.*
What’s more, the program was also a good audience development tool. “Our community wants to hear these perspectives,” Borenstein says, offering this indication of the program’s success: Participants and audience members continue to ask when the company will reprise it.

The Newcomer Play Project grew directly out of the lessons learned from the ongoing Elder Play Project, and the theatre’s desire to build on it. A TCG Audience (R)Evolution travel grant enabled key Long Wharf staff to do onsite research by visiting other companies—specifically Arena Stage in Washington, DC, and Seattle Rep in Washington state. By observing, learning, experimenting, and building on the work they had already done, they developed a structure that made sense for the particular needs of a group of individuals from all over the globe.

At the Library and Beyond

Long Wharf’s relationship with the New Haven Free Public Library is going strong, with many of the elements described in the case study still in place. “It’s now part of our DNA,” Borenstein says. However, the program has evolved significantly over time. “We’ve cut down the number of talks,” he says. “There was an overload of content, and some events were under-attended. Now we do programming at all five local branches, involving two shows—working with the library to see which programming is of most interest to the patrons. Also, we’ve learned that the participatory events are the best attended—those that involve a feeling of co-creation as opposed to lectures.”

These initiatives work best when there is an “organic connection to the work on stage,” Borenstein said, when the program uses the work as a touchstone. A particularly successful example included “Story Slams,” an event surrounding Napoli, Brooklyn by Meghan Kennedy that invited people to share stories about immigration. The program drew participants who have settled in Connecticut from all over the world. He also mentioned “History Slam,” at which the theatre invited individuals to tell stories from their own personal histories in conjunction with its production of Having Our Say by Emily Mann. Events surrounding Long Wharf’s recent production of Regina Taylor’s Crowns included a panel on mentoring (and fashion).

In addition, the library still makes free theatre tickets available to its patrons via passes that can be checked out with a library card. Borenstein reports that when passes were available for the first performance of Crowns, lines formed out the door. The Community Ambassadors program continues, where selected local influencers selected by the library attend for free and bring up to five guests (also free).

Overall, the goal of these audience engagement strategies remains the creation of multiple points of access to the theatre. Borenstein is frankly unsure how many of these initiatives ultimately lead to full-price sales—he acknowledged that some at the theatre hope participants will become subscribers—but emphasizes that the value of this programming is that it’s mission-driven, not margin-driven. “This is not about ticket buyers, but people who realize theatre can connect to their own life experience, and that they can express themselves through theatre. That can be meaningful for them and for the people who attend.”

One final detail: Long Wharf has been winding down the SPARK program, putting it on hold for the time being. Though they viewed it as a successful endeavor, the theatre leadership realized a course correction would be in order. “Participants loved it,” says Borenstein, but the program had a relatively small impact given the investment of time and resources it required. It was “more about audience enrichment than engagement,” he says, which is worthwhile but falls under a different mandate—marketing. Now it’s seen as a subscriber add-on.
Lessons Learned

I asked Borenstein to look back at Long Wharf’s audience engagement work over the past five years and list some of the lessons he has learned. Here is what he told me.

- “Take time to plan.” Successful audience engagement doesn’t happen overnight, he said.
- Creating relationships with new audiences requires credibility. “If you don’t have it, partner with organizations in the community that do.” Borenstein mentions Long Wharf’s work with the New Haven Free Public Library as an example of how a collaboration with another group that had deep connections to the community proved invaluable. Again, this work takes time.
- Active listening is essential. “It’s a form of market research,” he says, that helps generate buy-in, and creates a collaborative spirit from the get-go.
- Multi-year funding is essential to keep momentum from flagging. He gave an example of a program that had a single-year grant to support a pilot; once the grant ended, it was hard to start up again. “The worst thing you can do is create a program for 12 months and have it go away.”

It’s clear that the activity described in the case study has grown as it has evolved. Borenstein says that audience and community engagement have become more and more central to the organization, to complement the company’s mainstage theatre offerings. This work might alternatively be called “co-creation programming” or “professional/amateur collaboration,” he adds. “It’s exciting. More people can tell their stories, and it engenders diversity—racial and ethnic, age, socio-economic, and more.”

In recent years Long Wharf has hired a full-time community engagement manager whose presence has been key not primarily to start programs as much as enabling them to grow. “A lot of us touch these programs,” Borenstein explains, “but having a dedicated manager means that community members and organizations have one, single point of contact at the theatre. She can focus on networking in a way that wasn’t possible when disparate departments were involved.” This position originally came about when LWT made a pitch to a local funder whose focus is on community relationships in New Haven and its surroundings. The value of the position soon became self-evident, says Borenstein, and it is now funded through multiple donors.

Cast Changes – While Joshua Borenstein still leads the theatre as Managing Director, neither former Artistic Director Gordon Edelstein nor then Associate Artistic Director Eric Ting, who ran the SPARK program, is currently with the company.
OREGON SHAKESPEARE FESTIVAL, ASHLAND, OR

View original case study

Strategy 1 – Collaborate with the Migrant Education Program of the Southern Oregon Education Service District to help populate Oregon Shakespeare Festival's Cultural Connection Education Exchange. This partnership continues as one of many such relationships with local social service and arts organizations.

Strategy 2 – Develop relevant culturally specific programming for CultureFest. While the programming that powered CultureFest continues, it is now integrated into the theatre's work all season, every season, rather than through a biennial festival.

Strategy 3 – Enlist individuals from specific ethnic groups and organizational community connections to encourage attendance by their constituents at CultureFest. This work is ongoing, but no longer centered around CultureFest.

Oregon Shakespeare Festival (OSF) is still firmly committed to the guiding principles articulated in its Audience Development Manifesto, which is at the center of the strategies described in the case study—even as the specific strategies and initiatives created around the document have evolved.

Making Cultural Connections

While Cultural Connections remains central to OSF’s programming, the Cultural Connections Education Exchange (CCEE) program no longer exists in the form described in the case study. The program, which was a collaboration between the theatre's Audience Engagement and Education Departments, was intended to address cultural competency, says Freda Casillas, OSF’s audience development manager. The strategy has now evolved into a better collaboration with the Education Department that, according to Casillas, is more integrated into the theatre's overall work. “We wanted cultural competency infused through all education programs,” she explains.

CCEE was designed to expose students from under-represented cultural groups to Shakespeare and theatre in general via multiple school visits by OSF’s actor-teachers, followed by students' attendance at an OSF production. Casillas says that CCEE has helped OSF learn about youth in Ashland and the surrounding Rogue Valley, and those lessons have informed how the company has since reached out to the local Native community.

Casillas describes the work surrounding OSF’s production of Randy Reinholz's Off the Rails. The Choctaw playwright's adaptation of Shakespeare's Measure for Measure was the first play at OSF by a Native American writer. OSF worked with Dr. Brook Colley of nearby Southern Oregon University, who is a member of the Cherokee Nation. As a consultant, she was asked to evaluate the “play introductions” OSF offers for teenagers and others for all plays in the theatre's season.

Play introductions are live, person-to-person presentations in English or Spanish. These “prologues” are dynamic, 30-minute introductions to the plays that typically include advice about what to watch for in the performance. They are presented by a company member and often feature interactive elements that introduce characters, themes, language, and other background information. Students who attend prologues are better able to understand the plays and get more out of the experience—especially for plays with challenging themes or complex language such as Shakespeare's, according to the OSF website. Play introductions are available for purchase by any group attending a show at OSF.

“Brook [Colley] had many suggestions,” Casillas says. For example, “She said, ‘You need a different introduction for Native audiences than for other audiences.’ She also taught us that our materials implied there weren't any Native American people in our community any more, [when in fact there were.] She was right.”
Casillas was also keen to speak about OSF’s cohort of Ambassadors/Community Partners from specific ethnic groups, which is an evolution of Strategy #3. Casillas stresses that developing this roster is an effective way of connecting with new audiences; but it took an enormous amount of time and attention to build relationships and for her and the theatre to develop credibility with new partners. “I noticed that many ethnic-specific leaders in the community did not attend OSF. I chased them throughout the valley,” she says, making it a point to greet them in public but outside the theatre. Initially, there was resistance. She heard comments like, “That place [OSF] is just for old white people. They do have actors of color, but not plays and stories about people of color.”

This has changed over time. “Now we have so many Ambassadors, we don’t know what to do with them,” Casillas jokes. She happily reports that this is in part due to a TCG Audience (R)Evolution grant, which enlisted writer/activist Luis Alfaro in an initiative to bring community leaders and audiences from Oregon’s largest city to Ashland. The grant was written to help the company “reimagine their successful local Latino community-building model into a new and meaningful engagement program with a distant-destination audience...[of] Portland groups and youth of color [who] will overcome the obstacles to bringing these and other new audiences the 300 miles to Ashland.”

While the number of Ambassadors is a measure of success, a challenge for the future is how to better implement action, Casillas says.

One successful example of how the theatre reached out to a particular group: Ashland held its inaugural Indigenous People's Day celebration in 2017. Organized by Southern Oregon University, the city of Ashland, and Red Earth Descendants (a grassroots, indigenous-based organization) the event took place on the second Monday in October to replace Columbus Day. Casillas asked, “Can OSF help?” The company provided free tickets to Off the Rails for Native Americans by enlisting a donor to purchase 400 tickets for a bonus performance of the show. OSF also incorporated themed performances on outdoor stages as part of the theatre's free, outdoor “Green Show” performance series.

Another example: The executive director of Northwest Health Foundation, which seeks to advance, support, and promote health in Oregon, was an Ambassador. OSF joined with the foundation to collaborate on a health equity conference that drew leadership from all over the state.

Deb Small, the theatre's senior director of institutional giving, points out that these programs involve arts partners and non-arts partners. “In fact, the majority are non-arts partners.”

Casillas’s comments on working with partners echoes the insights she shared in the case study interview. “We do not launch programs that are created [solely] by OSF,” she told me, but rather by listening to the needs of the community of ethnically-specific organizations the theatre partners with. “Instead, we first ask, ‘What are your organization’s values and priorities?’ Then we say, ’Here is what we have to offer—How would you like to get involved with us?’”

CultureFest Rethought

Two of the strategies in the case study involved CultureFest, OSF’s biennial celebration of multi-ethnic cultures designed to focus attention on the theatre’s ongoing commitment to equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI). The final CultureFest took place in 2016, in collaboration with the National Asian American Theatre Conference and Festival. The program ended not because it was a failure, says Casillas, but because it was a success. “We realized we didn't have to do CultureFest anymore.” She points out that the program was originally intended to highlight “what we do for Latino audiences.” The program became part of OSF’s Cultural Connections initiative, which was established “for all people of color.” But as the initiatives grew, says Casillas, “we learned it was for all communities.” As OSF’s staff and audiences embraced CultureFest, it grew and became an integral part of OSF’s programming. “We had so many white allies,” said Casillas.
“We learned so much from CultureFest, and now we’re trying to activate that knowledge every day, every week. We realized we needed to do [the work] every week, not just every other year.”

Casillas praises the theatre's leadership for their continued embrace of the principles in OSF's Audience Development Manifesto, which, she says, has led to significant changes in mainstage programming. OSF now presents work by writers of color as part of each season, not just as part of CultureFest.

The shift from a biennial festival to season-long programming entailed some internal restructuring. Cultural Connections had been siloed from the Marketing/Communications department, Casillas says. “Now we can interweave everything we are doing in a more pronounced way.”

Casillas contextualizes this audience engagement work as part of the theatre’s overall EDI commitment, which dates back to the development and adoption of the Manifesto.

“If you are an organization without diversity and you haven’t trained yourself in EDI, you won’t be able to reach audiences of color. It costs money and takes time,” Casillas says. “You need an expert. Hire an EDI consultant who can teach you to have an open mind and heart—but then the work begins.” OSF has worked extensively with Carmen Morgan, the founder and director of artEquity. The company hosted artEquity’s inaugural sessions in 2015.

She continues, “You must go out and meet ethnic-specific leaders in your community. Not just one meeting; it takes many encounters. Start in your own backyard. Say hello.

Change also requires white allies, Casillas adds. She cites “Members for Equity,” a self-selected group of patrons that have initiated individual member-to-member conversations that take place in the theatre's Members’ Lounge. They engage in dialogue with other patrons in response to occasional negative comments about people of color performing in Shakespeare plays; or, in the Summer 2018 season, conversations around Artistic Director Bill Rauch’s production of Rodgers & Hammerstein's *Oklahoma!* that includes same-sex lead couples and other LGBTQ2+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, two-spirited, plus) casting. These patrons, who generally live in the Ashland area (much of OSF’s audience hails from elsewhere—it is a destination theatre), created the group on their own, with the support of the theatre’s Director of Equity. They are generally “white and wealthy—completely different from the folks who run the local food bank,” Casillas quips. These dedicated supporters of OSF’s mission and work chose to engage with other theatregoers via direct, person-to-person dialogue in an informal environment where the focus is on the patron, not the performance. Deb Small explains, “They figured the place they could make the most difference would be in the Member’s Lounge.”

“OSF is still learning, still learning, still learning,” says Casillas. “We learn every day how we unintentionally create barriers.” Twelve years ago when she was hired, “OSF was interested in being fair, being innovative, but we didn’t have a skill set or experience in EDI. People here didn’t know what diversity was.” They hired a diversity consultant and established affinity groups. “It was important for people of color that we could learn vocabulary to express ourselves to our white colleagues—and that we allow our colleagues to learn.”

Cast Changes – Freda Casillas was the audience development manager at the time of the case study, a post she occupies today. Director of Marketing and Communications Mallory Pierce remains in her position. Artistic Director Bill Rauch, who led the creation of the Audience Development Manifesto with Casillas and other senior staff in 2010, is set to depart the company in August 2019 to head up the new Perelman Center at the World Trade Center in New York City.
STEPPENWOLF THEATRE COMPANY, CHICAGO, IL

View original case study

Strategy 1 – Expand post-show opportunities for the public to interact with artists and other professionals around the theatre’s sometimes controversial work. Steppenwolf still offers post-show conversations following every performance, though the program has evolved.

Strategy 2 – Support artistic work more effectively through multiple digital communication platforms. The theatre continues to work in the digital space, experimenting and innovating.

Strategy 3 – Work in partnership with other organizations to address critical teen-related issues. “Now Is the Time” no longer exists, but learning from this program, which was spotlighted in the case study, has informed the theatre’s new “City Connections” initiative.

Thirteen years after Steppenwolf began inviting audiences to join post-show discussions following every single performance of the company’s productions, the talkback program is still in place. What began in the Artistic Department as a specific initiative for Bruce Norris’s controversial play *The Pain and the Itch* in 2005 (i.e., expanding discussions from weekly to nightly) is now a permanent element of the theatre’s ongoing “Public Square” concept, under which Steppenwolf uses its work onstage to drive public discourse on issues of civic and national importance.

Nightly Post-show Discussions: An Evolution

“The program has gone through five or six iterations,” says Executive Director David Schmitz. “We’re committed to continuing it indefinitely,” he says, but he points out that the discussions are now less guided than they were in their original conception, and less narrowly focused on dramaturgy. These days the dialogues offer participants the chance to ask “the questions they want to ask,” including “how did they do that?” inquiries. Facilitators also encourage audiences to engage with the work from their own emotional experience of the play, rather than singularly from a dramaturgical perspective.

And the talkbacks remain popular among Steppenwolf’s audience. Schmitz says that, on average, approximately ten percent of any given audience stays for a discussion, evenly split between subscribers and single-ticket buyers. He offers this metric as a clear indicator of the program’s success and ongoing popularity. “The program serves a distinct group of people—a significant proportion of our audience—and it serves them well.”

This was confirmed when the theatre brought in an outside research firm to measure the impact of the program via participant surveys. The study topics included whether post-performance discussions encourage audience members to purchase additional tickets (yes, though this is difficult to track), whether single-ticket buyers would be more likely to purchase a ticket knowing there is a talkback afterwards (40% said yes), and so on. It became clear, says Schmitz, that talkbacks drive loyalty to and knowledge about the company.

As the program has evolved, responsibility for its administration is now shared between the Artistic and Marketing Departments. There are challenges; Schmitz offered that the discussions “are not a favorite activity of the artists.” And it’s important though strenuous to maintain a full roster of qualified facilitators. As an example, Schmitz mentions Steppenwolf’s upcoming production of another Bruce Norris drama, *Downstate*, a play that features provocative content. He explains, “As we do work that is more diverse, this program needs to invest more in training moderators, honing their skills.”
Using Digital Media
Like many theatres, Steppenwolf continues to explore the use of digital tools for audience engagement (as well as in marketing, brand identity, ticket-selling, and more). Schmitz says that, not surprisingly, interest and investment in social media has only increased since the company first began to devote resources in this area. The past five years have been a time of experimentation and innovation; many particular tactics have come and gone. “We’re no longer posting and tweeting for the sake of doing so,” he says. Podcasts have fallen by the wayside, failing to rack up significant engagement numbers, says Schmitz, perhaps because they were show-specific and not people-specific.

The online content Steppenwolf is posting now is much more organic and creative in and of itself. “We were experimenting, throwing everything at the wall to see what sticks,” he explains. “And video is what sticks.” The theatre has made video a priority, shifting resources away from conventional advertising in favor of video production. Video now takes on key roles in social media, PR, and advertising efforts. It’s both creative expression and unabashed promotion, he says.

Of course, this requires institutional investment. Schmitz reports that over time, the number of staffers working on digital has expanded, and that all departments are now involved. He is candid about the payoff: “We work hard at driving revenue.” He points out that at least one aspect of digital work is readily trackable: It’s easy to see the return on investment through ticket sales and other measures. However, Schmitz is quick to mention that videos that go viral do not automatically translate to ticket sales.

Youth Initiatives: “Now Is the Time” and “City Connections”
The case study described Steppenwolf’s work to identify and then collaborate with outside partners to illuminate teen-centered issues and engage the public in conversation about them. The specific program implemented to further this strategy, “Now Is the Time,” operated through a city-wide partnership with several large civic institutions as well as community groups and other local theatre companies. The program was a one-year initiative, but it showed Steppenwolf a pathway for the company to serve this mission-central imperative through other means.

“Now Is the Time wasn’t sustainable, given the number of organizations involved and the complexity of the program,” Schmitz explains. However, “The program opened us up to the idea of touring, going into venues that are not theatres, and working with partner organizations throughout the city,” which, he mentions, is beyond Steppenwolf’s historical practice as a location- and season-based performance ensemble. Still, this work is core to the organization, he says, because it removes barriers between the theatre and new audiences. “If we’re about helping people in Chicago lead meaningful lives, we can’t do it just in our building.”

To that end, Steppenwolf has created various partnerships that further this part of the company’s mission. The new “City Connections” program, which grew out of Now Is the Time, is a “model principally rooted in building authentic and mutually beneficial partnerships and bringing Steppenwolf programming outside of the theatre walls and into communities we don’t currently serve.” City Connections provides “no-cost, barrier-free programming and establish[es] long-term partnerships with community organizations working to empower Chicagoland youth.” Specific programs include tours of Steppenwolf programs for youth to local juvenile justice facilities; a series of interactive, artist-led workshops in the West Austin neighborhood; free playwriting workshops led by writers such as Philip Dawkins at branches of the Chicago Public Library; and more. The Steppenwolf website explains: “Having opened up a dialogue between organizations and bringing our programming on the road, the company’s goal is for youth to feel inspired to come to Steppenwolf and experiment there as artists or arts appreciators.”
Building a Public Square

The idea of Steppenwolf as a “Public Square” that uses its work onstage to drive important civic discourse, which is discussed in the case study, remains central to Steppenwolf’s mission—though the thinking around it continues to evolve. “We kept tripping over how a theatre with a set methodology of how plays are delivered could realize the Public Square concept, whether through the work, in the digital space, or whatever.” The company is actively exploring how it can supplement or leverage a venue- and season-based producing model that has changed little over the years. As he sees other companies doing more and more, Schmitz says, “we are figuring out how to merge the social and theatrical experiences.”

Schmitz identified the company’s prominently-located multi-theatre space in Chicago’s Lincoln Park neighborhood as one element Steppenwolf could capitalize on when developing audience engagement strategies. “We got a grant to do a little research, and looked around at other organizations for inspiration,” Schmitz says. “We asked, ‘What would a room for a Public Square look like?’” One answer: “It should have food and drink.” And so Steppenwolf created “Front Bar,” which the theatre’s website describes as “a warm, creative space to grab a drink, have a bite, or meet up with friends and collaborators, day or night.” Though it’s a stand-alone entity adjacent to the theatre, the café/bar connects to Steppenwolf’s main building, forming an expanded lobby space for the theatre. Open to the street, Front Bar’s hours are 8am to 10pm (midnight on Fridays and Saturdays)—catering not just to theatre patrons, but also to the general public. “Now we have a public square in our space, where culture and social are one,” Schmitz says.

Cast Changes - Steppenwolf has undergone significant changes in institutional leadership since the time of the case study. Neither the late Artistic Director Martha Lavery nor former Executive Director David Hawkinson are still with the ensemble. However, current Executive Director David Schmitz has been with the company for more than a dozen years and was on staff at the time of the case study.
View original case study

Strategy 1 – Apply targeted phone banking using an audience-tracking and management database program. 
This is no longer a key strategy.

Strategy 2 – Use social media to engage and acquire young leaders and the next generation of audience members through TTO Treats, a social event. While the company uses social media and holds social events, the nature of this work has evolved.

Strategy 3 – Implement gamification with social media networks to encourage audience members to share personal information. Other engagement strategies have supplanted this work.

“Most of the case study is ancient history,” says Harold Steward, managing director of The Theatre Offensive (TTO). He reports that the specific programs described in the report did not last. However, he is quick to point out that the work the company is now doing comes from the same mission-based approach to providing opportunities for expression and a safe space for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender individuals in the Boston area. What’s new are the specific tactics involved.

Acts of Engagement

“Audience engagement and community development are at the core of our company. They are not special programs,” he says. TTO’s work is organized around “Out in Your Neighborhood,” a.k.a., OUT’Hood, which serves LGBTQ youth and others in several Boston neighborhoods. While performance is central to this work, it also embraces “empowering our community to have conversations about and work towards social change, [which] is essential for any change to happen.” OUT’Hood has four components:

- **Collective Creation** – TTO works with youth age 14 and up to create original performances based on their personal experiences (see True Colors, below);
- **Neighborhood Productions** – well-known local and national artists use input from community members to create and develop their art and then present it back into the community;
- **Workshop Exchanges** – youth and adult activists bring workshops to community-based organizations, events, and schools to create social change; and
- **Cultural Events** – collaboration with groups in the community to help create a visible LGBT presence at festivals, community occasions, and diverse moments that deserve to be celebrated.

OUT’Hood offers monthly produced or presented creative offerings, shows, events, and gatherings that bring programming to “local organizations, events, schools, and the streets.” The company often produces events in partnership with local businesses that are “trusted spaces” and have relevance in the community, including restaurants, social clubs, homes, etc. Steward listed several characteristics he says makes these events particularly valuable:

- **Consistency** – there’s always something happening
- **Easy to access** – these are free events, so cost is not a barrier
- **Geography** – the events take place in the four targeted neighborhoods, so that participants do not have to travel to experience the work
- **Easy to find** – use of all media, including person-to-person contact, to inform participants of how they can be a part of the work.
“We always look for long-term engagement,” says Steward. He describes a four- to six-week production schedule that maximizes community engagement. “Sometimes it’s a play, sometimes a workshop, or a story circle, or other programming, which might be devised or presented,” depending on the nature of the project.

One example he mentions is TTO’s upcoming collaboration with The Last Call, a multiracial group of queer artists, activists, and archivists, about the disappearance of lesbian bars in the U.S. The work was created through multiple visits that included extensive conversations with members of the local community, who became a built-in audience for the creation of the work. “Acts of engagement and creation are the same,” he says, explaining that deep engagement is the core of TTO’s work.

Out in the Streets

One of TTO’s key programs, as mentioned in the case study, is True Colors: Out Youth Theater, the country’s largest and longest-running LGBTQ youth theatre program, which gives LGBTQ young people the opportunity to write and perform plays based on their personal stories. When we spoke, True Colors was gearing up for a national tour of a piece about growing up as queer/trans*. The interview-based work focuses on “connecting intergenerational audiences to LGBTQ youth of color narratives—contemporary and historical—to illuminate and engage with the LGBTQ youth experience of today.”

As TTO’s work evolves, the company continues to reexamine how it carries out its mission. Steward lists two questions the theatre is constantly asking: “What does devised work look like for youth?” and, “Where does engagement/creation happen?”

TTO creates work all year round at multiple venues; it is not season-based. Steward points out that the company’s defining aesthetic involves working in non-traditional spaces. TTO invests deeply in making art where the people are. This approach was born when a member of the True Colors Troupe, said, “I should not have to take two busses and a train to be myself. I just want to be out in my own neighborhood.”

So what does that mean regarding content, tech elements, and aesthetic? For one thing, much of the company’s work takes place outside of conventional theatre spaces and instead in neighborhood social gatherings, workshops, performances and open discussions. “Our artistic expression is not defined by the Western canon, but by engagement,” says Steward. Much of the company’s work is about sharing stories, and exploring what experiencing those stories moves people to do. “We are a producing/presenting organization, but we do it differently,” Steward says. “Our practice is more traditional than not—but just not always Western tradition.” He posits this as a Theater of the Oppressed strategy—YOU are in charge of how the story gets shared.

Steward is upfront about challenges the company faces in this area. “We’re striving for organizational agility,” he says. He asks: How can we define our work loosely enough so we can make changes without redefining everything over and over again? Also, TTO grapples with sometimes rigid normative assumptions about what making art looks like. Says Steward, “‘Theater’ is in our name, but not all funders ‘get’ us, because not all of our work is tied to doing a play.”

What’s more, TTO operates without a permanent venue in neighborhoods that are rich with their own ongoing local and ethnic community events. But housing issues threaten people who live in those neighborhoods. Steward identifies gentrification and displacement as the biggest threats at the moment. Displacement comes along with erasure of cultural memory—when the stories being told no longer seem relevant. “So we try to find continuity within stories,” he says.

Much of TTO’s work comes through partnership with other organizations in the community, both arts- and non-arts groups. I asked Steward to list some of his useful practices when it comes to institutional collaboration.
“We work together with partners to maximize resources, whether it’s sharing audiences, spaces, or whatever,” he says. “We mostly partner with organizations of the same size.” Partners may be other arts organizations, or non-arts groups such as small businesses and local bars. TTO has partnered with Ebony Inn, a home in the Boston community run by a Native American black person; with Villa Victoria Center for the Arts/Inquilinos Boricuas en Acción, a non-profit community development corporation based in Boston’s South End neighborhood; and with Queer and Latinx film festivals.

Working with community groups and individuals, it’s important to create equitable partnerships, says Steward (a theme I heard repeatedly). “Ask what will be mutually beneficial. What will be the common benefit?” It can take a lot of work to understand and articulate how both organizations will benefit, but the effort is worthwhile. “We discuss how often can we, or should we, partner with a specific organization? Or is it better as a one-off?” And think carefully about what would happen if the business you’re working with closed, the individuals moved away, or the funding goes away.

“We’re now embedded with certain organizations,” Steward says. They may not work together every year, “but we know how to get each other on the phone.”

In the Digital Space

The case study discusses several social-media strategies which are no longer in place. The work took place before Steward arrived at the company, but I asked him how those and other efforts have informed TTO’s work in the online environment.

When it comes to social media, experimentation is the watchword, he says. “We’re still trying to figure it out. We’re being led in this area by the youth within the organization.” Nowadays, he continues, “youth prefer Instagram, and sometimes Twitter”; TTO tries to build messaging around the particular strengths of each medium. Twitter, for example, is limited to 280 characters; it’s instant and then vanishes. So it’s best for brief, newsworthy communications. While TTO does not generally build engagement strategies around social media at this point, the company is working in ALL media in communication with constituents, Steward says. “We’re still using Constant Contact [i.e., email blasts], Twitter, and Facebook, as well as person-to-person interaction, and community meetings. Even snail mail.” This is an imperative, he says, due to the intergenerational nature of TTO’s patrons.

Cast Changes – While Artistic Director Abe Rybeck is still at the company’s helm, Adrian Budhu, managing director at the time of the case study, has moved to TCG where he serves as COO/deputy director. The current managing director, Harold Steward, had been with the company for about a year at the time we spoke.
WOOLLY MAMMOTH THEATRE, WASHINGTON, DC
View original case study

Strategy 1 - Develop new social programs/initiatives in collaboration with community partners. 
This continues as a core activity.

Strategy 2 - Cultivate new audience members that mirror their current audience base and reach out to new audiences. Though it has evolved in practice, this remains part of the theatre's community development strategy.

Strategy 3 - Leverage group sales for partners. Woolly continues to work with groups.

Strategy 4 - Expand and rethink the terms on which the theatre engages with its audience beyond the performance itself. This strategy, which includes “audience design” and extensive lobby displays, remains the core activity of the Connectivity aspect of the theatre’s work.

“Connectivity” was the watchword of the Woolly Mammoth Theatre (WMT) case study, and Connectivity is still the organizing principle of the theatre’s engagement activities. Current Connectivity Director Kristen Jackson sees her job as deepening the conversation around shows at WMT, and creating opportunities for dialogue and understanding surrounding the work. In particular, she identifies and looks to mobilize community members who may have a vested interest in the material a particular play is exploring. “It’s their lived experience,” Jackson says, and the cornerstone of Connectivity.

Embracing Connectivity

“I begin by wearing my dramaturgical hat,” Jackson says, stressing the organic connection between her work and what is being presented on the WMT stage. “I ask, ‘Who needs to be in the room to make dialogue around the piece explosive?’ or, ‘Who are the folks who are experts in whatever this experience is?’” She explains that while WMT is expert at putting on plays, the theatre acknowledges that others in the community are experts in the subject matter the plays cover. Jackson spends much of her time bringing these realms together, working with community partner organizations, as well as individuals. Each collaboration looks different, she says, “which allows for, or even demands, creativity.” In each case we ask, “How do we engage?” The answer is different each time—but one thing is constant: “The connection between artistic programming and community is vital.”

One example she gives is a recent collaboration with Capturing Fire, a DC-based international queer poetry summit and slam festival. It took place during WMT’s staging of Jordan Tannahill’s Botticelli and the Fire, a play about queering history and the role of artists in the face of political oppression. WMT served as a supporting partner for the slam, providing a venue for the opening ceremony of the festival’s eighth season, numerous workshops, and the slam itself. “The collaboration explored connections between queer and trans artistry and identity, and the beauty that can come out of corrupt times,” Jackson says. “Artists came to share stories and passion” on WMT’s stage. It was “a rousing weekend of creativity.”

I asked about Strategy 2, which involved “The Claque,” volunteers who helped cultivate new audience members similar to the company’s patron base. The Claque has evolved into a new “Ambassador” program, which is comprised of individuals who are passionate about both WMT and volunteerism, and who help the company spread the word about the work. The group includes individuals and leaders from organizations that have partnered with WMT in the past, which helps keep them active in the WMT family. The theatre offers Ambassadors various social opportunities throughout the year including pre-show happy hours; a game night event celebrating the end of the season; invitations to opening nights; complimentary tickets to previews; discount codes to share with others; and so on. Other events that help bring them closer to artists include attendance at design meetings and even first reads of plays.
As with the other work of Connectivity, this shift to the Ambassador program came only through constant experimentation and re-assessment. “It’s still evolving,” Jackson says. “We’re figuring out what the right spaces are for this.” Lately, the company has been investigating personal development opportunities. “We ask, what can Woolly uniquely share with Ambassadors beyond our plays?” Examples include a skills-building voice and speech session led by a Woolly company member, and a devising workshop meant to support organizations and individuals with thinking on their feet and working collaboratively.

**Audience Design**

The case study described Woolly Mammoth’s concept of “audience design” (Strategy 4), whereby the theatre works to build an audience with the same care that the company invests in the design of a show’s sets or lights. “It’s still part of the work we do around each show,” says Jackson. She leads the staff in considering “who needs to be in the room to make the experience meaningful.” They begin by asking, “Who completes this story?”

Although it begins with dramaturgy, audience design is not just about subject matter. The sweet spot for Jackson lies “at the intersection between demographics and psychographics.” In other words, she asks who should be in the audience based on not just their interest in the issues raised by the play, but also on their affinity for the kind of work WMT produces. “Woolly’s plays are provocative, challenging, and rousing. We want audiences who are interested in that experience as well as in the civic issues at the heart of the plays.” She shares that there have been times when people have been interested in the subject matter but offended by the play, which has been challenging. WMT’s approach to theatre—often staging work that involves “stirring things up,” as Jackson puts it—doesn’t always jive with people interested in a particular civic conversation. I ask how she deals with this. “I try to be transparent,” she replies, about the work and its form. “I try to be transparent,” she replies, about the work and its form. “It helps a lot if the patron has experienced a show at Woolly in the past, but 60-70% haven't.” So she shares scripts in advance, and asks potential partners to read the play in its entirety. She invites them to see the work beforehand whenever possible, as well as other plays at WMT.

“People don't like to say ‘no,’ but they will tell you what their trepidation is, if you listen,” Jackson says. “I make it a point to not listen for what I want to hear, but to listen to what [partners] are actually saying,” especially when they express concern. She adds, “Be willing and able to let go if something isn’t the right fit.”

**Lobby Design**

I also asked about interactive lobby design, another element discussed in the case study as part of Strategy 4. WMT still curates and mounts extensive lobby displays for most, though not all, shows (WMT’s production of *Baby Screams Miracle* by Clare Barron didn't have one, because the theatre’s conversation around the play didn’t lend itself to that medium). The most successful lobby work, Jackson says, gives audiences a measure of choice whether to interact—or not. She mentions as a particularly resonant example the display surrounding WMT’s production of *Cherokee* by Lisa D’Amour (2015) which asked audiences to identify where “their own personal Cherokee, NC was—a place they go to for escape, more deeply connect with nature or themselves and others.” The display included a touch screen with Google maps and pins that audience members could place. By the end of the run they had created a “digital map of significance” which the company shared both in the theatre lobby and online.

There are complications, of course. Jackson mentioned that creating interactive displays can be time-consuming and often requires a hefty commitment of resources. She said that the theatre's Marketing Department tends to value consistency of experience, whereas the customized displays may vary greatly in tone, content, and user experience from show to show. WMT rents out its spaces, which means that the displays must be easily removable and easy to remount.
Timing is always a problem, since installation inevitably coincides with tech. “It’s a delicate dance,” she says, to balance competing needs around the theatre’s physical space.

But in terms of patron experience, the impact is positive, Jackson says. While the measures of success here are anecdotal, they are significant. Many in the audience come to expect displays. One patron demanded, “Where’s my lobby?” when she attended a production without a display.

**Measuring Impact**

Jackson spoke about measurement of impact, and how the company has recently been taking steps to more effectively capture community-related data. “We create and track codes through Tessitura, including tickets, revenue, etc.” She has instigated a detailed post-event activity form that the staff uses to record both quantitative and qualitative data. The reports, based on note taking during sessions, include subjective responses such as the mood of the audience or whether people linger in the lobby, and other anecdotal measures of engagement.

Another example of the more systematic approach the theatre is taking in this area: “We ticket more events than ever before, even though they are free.” This allows the theatre to collect more data on the individuals walking through the doors. Also, her staff always does manual head counts, because “not all tickets get scanned.”

**Lessons Learned**

Jackson explains that connectivity, and her audience engagement work in general, is about “relationship-building, and every relationship has its own unique timetable.” She adds that collaborations must be mutually beneficial, and both partners must invest in them. Other learnings she shared include:

- WMT’s Connectivity department is still small (basically, her plus interns and associates), though she collaborates with other departments of the theatre. “Having a Connectivity Department is great,” she says. “Or, task your marketing/development/production department to ask what connectivity looks like. That’s how theatres can make ourselves more relevant to the people we serve—and embrace diversity of ideas and experiences beyond what’s contained in our four walls.” Jackson says she is always asking, “To what extent is Connectivity a department, and to what extent is it a global strategy?”

- “Think about how you staff your department,” she advises. Not just the number of people involved, but how to retain relationship knowledge so that as personnel change over time, relationships do not have to be rekindled from scratch. Jackson is actively exploring how to assign specific organizers for specific projects, so that they can dig deep over time—and so that the Connectivity Director isn’t leading all projects. Ultimately, this will serve all parties by providing a longer period of time to create and deepen relationships.

- Spend time OUTSIDE the theatre building as much as possible when working with partners. This takes time and effort; you may not see immediate results.

- Be in it for the long term, not for immediate gain. Be clear what your goals are, and devote the time necessary to achieve them.

**Cast Changes** - None of the artistic or managing leaders of the theatre at the time of the case study are still with the company. The theatre’s current Connectivity Director, Kristen Jackson, has been in her position for four years. With a significant leadership change on the immediate horizon—I spoke with Jackson just before incoming Artistic Director Maria Manuela Goyanes was about to begin her tenure—Jackson joked, “A year from now my answers may be all different.” I suspect that the Connectivity Department, though permanently ingrained into the company, is still navigating its place in the institution. It will be interesting to see what adjustments come with a new artistic director joining the team.
YOUTH SPEAKS, SAN FRANCISCO, CA

View original case study

Strategy 1 – Develop enhanced digital platforms to redefine the way youth engage with Youth Speaks.
The specific program described in the case study has been supplanted by a more targeted approach.

Strategy 2 – Develop a community of organizations invested in spoken-word poetry as a means to engage youth.
The roster of partner organizations continues to grow, though not without challenges and adjustments.

Strategy 3 – Engage and foster youth leaders. This imperative remains mission-central to the organization.
The original case study describes “I Live Here” as the main initiative through which Youth Speaks addressed Strategy 1. This digital platform was designed to create an ongoing conversation with young people across the country. It involved the creation of a digital map that would record the changing demographics of the U.S. through spoken word and theatre. This was an ambitious project that aimed for breadth, says Producing Director Joan Osato, helping the company “reach young people who didn't have access to us in person.” Approximately 250,000 youth were affiliated with Youth Speaks programs at the time, and Osato says that although the program was successful with many young people submitting poems and testimonials, the platform no longer exists.

A More Targeted Approach

Instead, Youth Speaks’ approach to engaging with youth has shifted towards more targeted campaign work on several of the most relevant themes that arose from the previous project. “We're looking at parts of the big picture, rather than throwing everything out there and asking for opinions on everything,” Osato says. While the underlying mission remains unchanged, the focus is narrower and more political.

Osato cites two current projects that give youth of color a digital platform to tell their personal stories about important topics targeted by Youth Speaks. One is “I Want to Live,” which focuses on racial profiling and police violence. It's an evolution of a program that was primarily digital into a new format that embraces both film and live engagement. The project centers on young people’s interaction with the police as the basis to encourage youth to express opinions, share viewpoints, and offer testimonials in a series of commissioned films posted on YouTube and elsewhere.

“I Want to Live” has grown to include collaborations with other companies. In 2015, Berkeley Repertory Theatre (Berkeley, CA) produced Anna Deavere Smith's Notes from the Field: Doing Time in Education. For the second act of the play, 30 young poet facilitators from Youth Speaks created conversations with audience members around the theme of the “school-to-prison pipeline,” which pushes youth from poor communities out of the classroom and into the criminal justice system. Approximately 14,000 people participated over six weeks, engaging with Youth Speaks in the “live” in-person sense. This work also led to a commission of a new play set to open in the fall of 2018, and targeted workshops with seven partners in California.

The second project Osato mentions is a campaign called “The Bigger Picture,” which involves a partnership with the University of California at San Francisco’s Center for Vulnerable Populations. It’s designed to take on the environment and social factors that have driven the rise of the type 2 diabetes epidemic, and to bolster environmental literacy among young people of color. The program aims to inspire young people to change the national conversation about the disease by exposing the environmental and social conditions that lead to its spread. It comprises commissioned work (performance poetry) and a series of YouTube videos. The program has also generated activism, including getting youth involved in campaigns surrounding a sugar tax and targeted wellness initiatives. “The Bigger Picture” spotlights work by young California performance poets, including young people from immigrant families struggling with American diets, and youth who live in neighborhoods that are food deserts. Osato describes the program as an invitation for young people to look at and confront a public health emergency by making art based on personal experience.
I learned from Osato that Youth Speaks has refined and expanded the work behind the strategy described in the case study. She mentions that both I Want to Live and The Bigger Picture required website builds tailored to the specific needs of each one. Youth Speaks created a digital platform for each program to engage young people, as well as other key constituencies. The sites included videos created by young people, as well as statistical info, toolkits for teachers, resources for activism, and other helpful information. Also, Osato says that focusing on real, day-to-day issues that affect people has proved successful, and that Youth Speaks will continue to use this model for other types of work covering different subjects and needs. She measures its success by the amount of two-way conversation that takes place with young people, as opposed to one-way presentations. It’s about “using art as a tool for direct interaction.”

**Brave New Voices: A National Poetry Slam Festival and Network**

Brave New Voices (BNV) is Youth Speaks’ signature national program. It brings together a network of organizations that invest in spaces that challenge young people to find, develop, present and apply their voices through an international festival of young writers that features a youth poetry slam.

“We have always dreamed of a more formal network of affiliated organizations across the U.S.,” Osato says, affirming one of the strategies described in the case study. The company set out to take lessons and models otherwise used once a year for the annual BNV Festival and expand them across the entire year—and the nation. Youth Speaks has established the Brave New Voices Network, a seven-year initiative dedicated to building a sustainable field of nonprofit organizations and programs throughout the U. S. that “intersect arts education and youth development practices with a deep focus on long-term civic engagement and public presentation.” The initiative provides general operating support, training and other types of technical assistance, along with peer learning exchanges, digital support and visibility to programs and organizations nationwide. The project is eligible to programs and organizations that specifically focus on providing writing and performance opportunities to youth ages 13-24. “It took ten years to implement the network,” Osato says, stressing that the effort involved both long-term thinking and persistence.

**Brave New Voices Network supports participating partner organizations through a two-pronged approach:**

1. Youth Speaks provides approximately 100 affiliates nationwide with training, technical assistance, peer learning exchanges, digital support, and visibility, along with webinars on such topics as organizational capacity, pedagogy, and fundraising.

2. A $10 million Leadership Cohort regranting program offers support for consulting on technical assistance, capacity building, staffing, encouraging emerging leadership, and more. The goal is to build a community of healthy partner organizations. The program matches consultants to organizations based on needs—rural, urban, large, small, different budget sizes and capacities. The three-year measured grants are used for capacity-building and project support, for staff hiring, healthcare, expanding programs, board development, etc.

**Future Corps: Engaging and Fostering Youth Leaders**

The case study identifies a strategy of engaging and fostering youth leaders through the Future Corps program. One of Youth Speaks’ key goals was to train Future Corps participants to run and organize events, create documentation, assist with production, and lay the groundwork for participation in future leadership opportunities. Osato reports that not only does Future Corps continue, it has become “the engine that runs Brave New Voices,” with individuals committing to two years of service on a rotating basis. “Fantastic young people from all over the world are developing their leadership skills,” says Osato.

Here’s an indication of the program’s success: “This year, alumni of Brave New Voices ran the entire festival,” Osato says. She explains that all the director positions were filled by BNV and Future Corps alums serving in leadership roles in many
different departments (some have become Youth Speaks staffers). “The expectation is that this year’s Future Corps members will become future leaders,” Osato says.

In 2015 Youth Speaks expanded the program to create Future Corps Fellows. This initiative identified and placed eight individuals in fellowships at BNV partner organizations as part of the Leadership Cohort regranting program (see above). The Fellows apply the pedagogy of the Youth Speaks BNV pathway, while embedded in the organizations. “They are honing people skills so that they emerge as future leadership of those organizations,” Osato says. Fellows serve as full-time, salaried staff for two years, supporting their host organizations in advancing their missions and their capacity to create safe spaces for writing and performance opportunities that elevate youth voices. In turn, Fellows receive training and mentorship in various areas of nonprofit business. The second round of Fellows was about to launch when we spoke.

**Challenges and Lessons Learned**

I asked Osato about the challenges the organization has faced in the years since the case study. She offers that succession, burnout, and human infrastructure are always issues, both at Youth Speaks and with partner organizations. She mentions that one of the 18 grants in the first cohort didn’t work out. The recipient organization eventually closed, unable to take the next steps forward in professional development.

Still, the work Youth Speaks has done to develop a community of organizations invested in spoken-word poetry as a means to engage youth (Strategy 2) has continued to generate results. Osato is quick to point out that these efforts include knowledge-sharing, and program sharing as well. Much of Youth Speaks’ work involves dissemination of programs and practices that promote youth voices and highlight the aesthetics and art of young people. And although online media (especially video) is a key part of this effort, it’s worth noting that much of the dissemination and sharing occurs through direct people-to-people contact in the form of mentorship, training, and convening.

As the case study demonstrates, Youth Speaks puts considerable effort into evaluation tools and program assessments. These “still prove really useful,” says Osato. She adds that because Youth Speaks has 30 or 40 programs in its portfolio, this entails a huge amount of evaluation work. So in the spring of 2018 the company hired ethnographer/storyteller and PhD candidate Amanda Frye Leinhos as its first associate director of research and evaluation. Leinhos is tasked with both evaluating programs and assessing how those programs are evaluated.

“This is outside of our experience, even though we have been doing the work,” says Osato. “Evaluation has often been funder-driven” or required by contract when working with government entities. “Youth Speaks was generating a lot of evaluation data, but we were asking, ‘Is this data useful for us?’ This new staff position, which may one day become a department, is a way of making sure that evaluation is not just based on external criteria, but also on what is valuable for us.”

Acknowledging that Youth Speaks’ work with community organizations and participants-as-creators is different from the typical season-based resident theatre company, I asked Osato what lessons she could share based on her experience. “Many theatres do a lot of one-offs,” she says. “But authentic engagement requires a lot of time. You need time, and you need the right people. The subject is important, too.” She points out that the staff of Youth Speaks is almost entirely people of color, which mirrors the population the organization serves. “Whose story are you telling? Who is telling the story? Who is speaking with the audience and artists?”

**Cast Changes** - Joan Osato was Producing Director at the time of the case study, and she remains in that position. The company’s current executive director is Cristy Johnston Limón; neither her predecessor, James Kass, nor former National Program Director Hodari Bayano Davis, is still with the organization.
CONCLUSION

From the beginning, TCG’s vision for Audience (R)Evolution involved identifying and highlighting useful strategies and areas of interrogation that offered opportunities for replication, and that might become catalysts or sources of inspiration for other companies. I’ve tried to include lessons learned by the participants whenever possible. In this section, I add a series of gleanings based on my own observations of the work of the nine studied theatres. I hope these insights elucidate and inspire, and that theatres find them useful in developing audience engagement and community development strategies customized to their own, unique aesthetics and contexts.

GLEANINGS

- Successful audience engagement strategies flourish through focus, commitment, and flexibility, based on long-term commitment. Individual programs come and go, but the values that drive them persist.

- Audience engagement and community development look very different at different theatres. There is a broad spectrum of strategies, approaches, and practices. At some companies, engagement efforts are complementary to the work on stage; at others, it is the work. But different companies can learn from each other’s experiences and practices.

- “Acts of engagement and creation are the same,” says TTO’s Harold Steward. Engagement often involves co-creation, or at least participation in creation—not just the consumption of art. As LWT’s Josh Borenstein says, community engagement might also be called “co-creation programming” or “professional/amateur collaboration.”

- Audience engagement takes time—especially when it comes to trust-building. Think long-term. Devote the resources necessary. Develop multiple points of contact in your organization so that you retain relationship knowledge despite inevitable personnel changes.

- Experiment. Keep moving forward even when (especially when) things don’t work out as expected. Don’t be afraid to fail. When you do, don’t stop. Try something else. As HERE’s Kristen Marting says, “We’re always trying to be more effective, dumping things that don’t work, and experimenting with new ones.”

- Do research. Listen deeply. Don’t just state what the theatre has to offer; listen to the needs voiced by the organizations you’re partnering with and the individuals you’re hoping to engage. OSF’s Freda Casillas advises: Begin by asking a potential partner, “What are your organization’s values and priorities?”

- Spend time outside your theatre’s building, and outside of your comfort zone. Says Casillas, “You must go out and meet ethnic-specific leaders in your community. Not just one meeting; it takes many encounters. Start in your own backyard. Say hello.”

- Different strategies and activities are best suited for different audiences. Embrace and celebrate the diversity of your community, and adjust accordingly.

- Engagement around specific productions or projects works best when it is based on an organic connection to the work on stage (or wherever performances take place).

- Think about how you speak with audiences—and who is doing the speaking. Ask yourself these questions from Youth Speaks’ Joan Osato: “Whose story are you telling? Who is telling the story? Who is speaking with the audience and artists?” Hire people who look and sound like your target audiences. Not just on your stage, but on your staff as well—from the front-of-house team to the executive office.
Measuring success can be tricky—so be creative! Take a systematic approach. Use all tools at your disposal, including surveys; and strategize when/how to invest dollars into research.

Successful strategies often are grounded in—or generate—participation and buy-in from many departments at the theatre, not just Audience Development (or Marketing or Education).

Digital media can supplement—but does not replace—conventional media, including “analog” in-person experiences of many different kinds.

Partnerships should be equitable, mutually beneficial, and should be sustained over time to develop trust. This may involve working with arts organizations as well as non-arts organizations. Remember that, as Woolly Mammoth’s Kristen Jackson puts it, “Every relationship has its own unique timetable.”

Make EDI work central to your organization’s practice. Consider hiring an experienced consultant, but be prepared to do the work this commitment requires. Be open to learning. And, as Casillas says, allow your white colleagues to learn too.

As with many of the theatre leaders I spoke with, Steppenwolf’s David Schmitz is an insightful longtime worker in and observer of the field. I asked him to summarize his learning about how theatres can mount successful audience engagement initiatives. His recipe for experimentation, exploration, and (hopefully) success sounded to me like excellent guidance:

- Identify a need.
- Do research.
- Identify a possible solution.
- Start an experiment.
- Make changes and do it again, learning from your successes and failures.
- Do small experiments, then bigger ones.

As the case studies show, theatres are embracing these and other learnings as best practices. That’s a good thing, because in times of profound civic divisions, no medium is better suited than theatre to forging deep connections with its audience; no art form offers a more vital forum for civic discussion in real time within communal, shared spaces.

Theatres are temples of storytelling, but it isn’t just the artists who are telling the stories. With companies embracing so many promising audience engagement strategies, it’s no wonder that whenever members of a community gather to listen and watch or to create and share (or all of the above) inside a theatre—even if the theatre’s venue is a non-traditional one—the art form thrives.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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For more information on TCG’s **Audience (R)Evolution** program please contact AudienceRev@tcg.org or visit [www.tcg.org](http://www.tcg.org).

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