Case Studies

Developed by Theatre Communications Group, with funding provided by the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, the Audience (R)Evolution Program is designed to study, promote and support successful audience-engagement models. Through specific case studies, the project’s goal is to tell organizations’ stories based on institutional insight, qualitative and quantitative data, and personal perspective.
INTRODUCTION

“I started asking pressing questions about how we ensure that our audiences bring vitality into our theatre, and instead of talking about big audiences we started talking about ‘vital’ audiences...and how do we extend that vitality through the life of the production, looking at audience composition, not just butts in seats?”

—Howard Shalwitz, Founding Artistic Director

Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company (WMTC) has identified “Connectivity” as a major strategy for audience engagement. The theatre devotes a considerable amount of effort to developing theme-based interactive activities tied to its programming and creating initiatives to work with a number of community partners. These efforts are aimed at expanding its audience within particular demographics as well as expanding beyond those demographics. This case study explores several of those efforts and the strategies that drive them.

TCG engaged AMS Planning & Research, a national arts management consulting firm, to provide research expertise for this project. AMS gathered data by way of institutional and audience surveys, and conducted interviews with staff, board members and artistic leadership. Interviews were conducted in March and April 2013.

CASE STUDY

WMTC’s Connectivity program is the theatre’s initiative to create and strengthen connections between the theatre and its patrons in the community. A number of strategies specifically designed to work in tandem with each show offer attendees a variety of opportunities for engagement.

This program grew out of conversations that took place as the theatre was preparing for its 30th anniversary season, 2009–10. The theatre convened a conference called “Who’s in Your Circle?” One outcome of the conference and ongoing discussion was a shift from considering WMTC as primarily a place for entertainment toward seeing the institution as a conduit for civic discussion. The theatre revisited its mission statement to emphasize a commitment to “explosive engagement” with the community. As WMTC’s Jocelyn Prince wrote for the TCG website, “We work to make the case for relevance in the everyday lives of our audiences with a deliberate synergy of art, analysis and activism.”

WMTC has articulated three core principles associated with Connectivity:

- **Audience Composition/Audience Design**: This must be addressed with the same presence of thought as the technical aspects of a show.

- **Total Audience Experience**: How do you look at every step of the audience’s involvement, from the first time they hear about the show until they leave the theatre, and perhaps even after that? What are the various opportunities for engagement?

- **Points of Entry**: What core questions does the play raise that will be compelling for members of the community and create linkages to new constituencies?

As part of the research effort, WMTC completed an institutional survey sharing the goals and strategies associated with

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1 http://www.tcgcircle.org/2014/02/ripple-effects/
its audience-engagement programs. The theatre identified its Connectivity program as the main paradigm for theatre’s initiatives in this area. Tables detailing this information appear in the appendix to this case study.

Specific organizational strategies discussed for this case study were:

1. Develop new social programs/initiatives in collaboration with community partners,
2. Cultivate new audience members that mirror their current audience base and reach out to new audiences,
3. Leverage group sales for partners,
4. Expand and rethink the terms on which the theatre engages with its audience beyond the performance itself.

Of the five Audience-Engagement Strategy Clusters developed as part of this overall research effort (see Research Approach, page 11), those in alignment with WMTC’s efforts were the Segment (#2, above), Relationship (#1, #2 and #4, above), Venue/Path (#4, above) and Income (#3, above) strategies.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

The case study included interviews with the following individuals:

Howard Shalwitz, Founding Artistic Director  
Jeff Herrmann, Managing Director  
Miriam Weisfield, Associate Artistic Director  
Jocelyn Prince, Connectivity Director  
Scott Schreiber, board member  
Pete Miller, board member  
J. Chris Babb, board member  
Ray Crawford, Claque participant

STRATEGIES

STRATEGY 1
Develop new social programs/initiatives in collaboration with community partners.

Founding Artistic Director Howard Shalwitz and Managing Director Jeff Herrmann discussed WMTC’s initiative to create theme-based interactive activities tied to specific productions in collaboration with community partners.

As background, the interviewees stated that the theatre's productions are designed to not only entertain, but also to be an avenue to enhance the experience of the particular community that is engaged by them. WMTC engaged partners in this process whenever possible.

An example: After a performance of WMTC's 2013 production of Lisa D'Amour's Detroit, a play during which the characters “discuss suburban angst of upward mobility, spousal relationships and economic anxiety,” 2 WMTC partnered with the Veterans Writing Project (VWP) 3 on a Detroit Military Night. The theatre made ticket discounts available to active-duty military, veterans and military families, who were invited to a preshow reception with food, drink and conversation.

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3 The Veterans Writing Project provides no-cost writing seminars and workshops for veterans, active and reserve service members and military family members as a means for them to share their stories.
A postshow discussion focused on economic and personal themes of the play, and the ways the military community is affected by these issues.

For WMTC’s production of *The Convert*, a play by Danai Gurira set in southern Africa that deals with village life during the arrival of Christianity in the colonial era, the theatre teamed with the Zimbabwe Education Fund for a preshow reception. The reception with members of the Fund included a silent auction and drinks and hors d’oeuvres. The event served as a fundraiser to support children’s education in Zimbabwe.

The theatre sees itself as providing space in a safe environment to discuss important issues. An example of partnering to achieve this goal took place around an August 2013 event entitled From Emmett Till to Trayvon Martin: A Town Hall Meeting on Black Bodies and American Racism. Participating organizations included the African Continuum Theatre Company, Hannah Mothers Campaign, Plymouth Congregational United Church of Christ, Rock the Vote and Washington Peace Center. The event, which took place on the eve of the 50th anniversary of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s March on Washington, included a panel discussion on the recently completed trial of George Zimmerman (acquitted in the shooting of Trayvon Martin), along with racial profiling and race relations in Washington, DC. The free town hall meeting “aim[ed] to foster a dialogue among activists, academics, artists, policy-makers and interested community members to identify potential next steps and an action plan for change.” After a question-and-answer period, participants met in small groups to talk about what kind of relevant actions might take place in the future. This event tied in with two of the season’s plays that dealt with race and racism, *Appropriate* by Branden Jacobs-Jenkins and *We Are Proud to Present...* by Jackie Sibblies Drury.

The desired outcome of these initiatives is that those who participate in the theatre’s activities see that WMTC’s work and the messages shared have relevance to their lives, and to make theatre a fundamental part of their community.

**STRATEGY 2**

*Cultivate new audience members that mirror the current audience base and reach out to new audiences.*

This strategy is two-pronged. According to interviewees, as important as it is to bring in new people, it’s just as important to continue to attract the demographic that currently attends WMTC. Associate Artistic Director Miriam Weisfield explained that this requires a great deal of personal relationship building.

The theatre convened a group of audience members called the Claque to help cultivate new audience members that mirror the current audience base. The Claque is a small group of invested Connectivity volunteers that function as one-part focus group and one-part innovation lab. These volunteers include young professionals from diverse backgrounds. During the planning stage of every show at WMTC, staff members gather with Claque members to read the play aloud from beginning to end. According to staff, the Claque serves as a good testing group as the staff begins to shape conversations, events and activities around the show. Claque members reach out to their own circles to promote the upcoming production. They also provide guidance regarding targeted marketing for the production and brainstorm activities that would appeal to the identified market segments.

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4 Hannah Mothers Campaign works to end the national genocide of black men and boys in communities throughout the United States. http://hannahmothers.wordpress.com


6 Complete title: *We Are Proud to Present a Presentation About the Herero of Namibia, Formerly Known as Southwest Africa, from the German Sudwestafrika, Between the Years 1884-1915.*
Regarding expanding the demographic scope of the audience, WMTC took a different but related approach. Staff made an effort to familiarize themselves with the missions of nonprofit organizations in the DC area. For each production, the theatre identified prospective Connectivity Partners for productive collaborations, and then enlisted a partner whose work relates to the themes and issues that pertain to the production. According to staff, WMTC’s Connectivity Partners are key conduits that provide access to a certain demographic. They help to enhance understanding of the show’s themes internally for artistic staff. They reach out to their own constituencies about the show and collaborate on an aspect of WMTC engagement activities. For example, a partner might recommend an appropriate contact to serve on a discussion panel, or offer guidance and research for lobby design.

STRATEGY 3
Leverage group sales for partners.

WMTC collaborates with Connectivity Partners in other ways too. For example, WMTC offers discounted group rates for their Connectivity Partners, which creates a gateway to partners’ constituencies.

When Connectivity Director Jocelyn Prince approaches a potential partner to collaborate on their efforts, she has two main assets to offer: space and tickets. She offers the potential partner use of the WMTC facility and the opportunity for the partners’ constituents to see a show at WMTC. Conversely, the partner’s main asset is access to “people”—a constituency base.

Partnership typically looks something like this: WMTC identifies a production that they believe will speak to a partner’s constituents. The organization purchases tickets in bulk to sell to their constituents for whatever price they desire as a fundraiser.

Prince reported that WMTC does one of these joint donor cultivation events for every show. As an example, she reiterated the collective positive results of WMTC’s collaboration with the Veterans Writing Project around Detroit. VWP provided food for a preshow reception, as well as a panelist for a postshow discussion, in what Prince called a Community Ambassadors Fundraising model. VWP constituents came together in a preshow dinner. The event paid for itself in that the ticket price covered the cost of the dinner. The tickets were sold at a premium. Prince described the event as a wonderful networking opportunity and a way to get people into the building.

STRATEGY 4
Expand and rethink the terms on which the theatre engages with its audience beyond the performance itself.

The theatre works with a concept it calls “audience design,” to build an audience with the same care a theatre designs a show’s sets or lights. The staff considers who needs to be in the room to make the experience meaningful. As a first step, the staff analyzes the show’s content to help them determine who should be in the audience. A show might contain information that speaks to a particular group because of specific points of demographic alignment (age, race, religion, sexuality, geography, etc.); however, each show might also contain aesthetic and thematic elements that appeal to certain attitudes and opinions. WMTC thinks about a) psychographics—where their constituents work, what their hobbies are, what their interests are; and b) the zeitgeist of the theatre’s community—what audience members are thinking about inside and outside of the theatre, locally, nationally and internationally, so as not to produce plays in a vacuum.

The organization then works toward constructing a total audience experience, which extends to its interactive lobby designs. According to staff, the lobby is designed to help illuminate the content or form of the show; enliven
the theatregoing experience; activate the audience’s critical intelligence; encourage strangers to talk to one another; and form community even before the doors open. A key guiding question that the Connectivity staff considers when brainstorming lobby plans is, “What connections are we asking [the audience] to make?”

A particularly successful effort was a WMTC “House Lights Up” event called “Pinspiration,” designed by the theatre’s Connectivity department to more fully engage patrons around the theatre’s presentation of Second City’s America All Better!! Through an interactive lobby experience, funded partly by a TCG Audience (R)Evolution grant, WMTC invited audience members to vote on the state of American society via texts and tweets. The polling results were displayed in real time in the lobby after the show, and audience members received tailor-made infographics in their postshow emails, based on responses from their fellow attendees. WMTC also pinned colorful infographics to its Pinterest page and allowed audiences to compare what they believe is true with what is actually “true” either online or in the lobby via a touchscreen display.

**SUCCESSES**

Shalwitz and Herrmann suggested that the organization has seen success from these strategies in several areas. These included a growing cohesiveness among/between staff as they create the means to implement their strategies; the willingness of partners to work with the institution; and in the positive response to these efforts as expressed from groups who participate in WMTC events and attend productions.

Prince cited ongoing communication between staff and new and long-time audience members. She noted Claque as particularly successful in advancing the organization’s audience-engagement agenda.

Ray Crawford, a member of Claque, described success as seeing diverse audiences at the theatre. He noted that with the rising number of young people living in the Washington, DC area, an influx of this population coming to the theatre would build on this success.

**CHALLENGES**

Shalwitz said that on various occasions the lobby experience has been too elaborate for patrons to grasp in the short period of time allotted for them to do so, and that the staff is keeping this in mind for future engagement design.

Prince cited a lack of adequate staffing in her department as a challenge (just herself and an intern). She also mentioned that for the organization’s production of The Elaborate Entrance of Chad Deity, a hip-hop play by Kristoffer Diaz about American multiculturalism through the lens of wrestling, WMTC partnered with the Hustle, Muscle and Mat Club, a nonprofit organization that teaches youth and adults how to wrestle. WMTC provided mats and offered wrestling clinics, but very few people came. This experience taught Prince that putting information on a website is not enough to attract people, and traditional advertising does not always work. It highlighted the importance of being out in the community and helped her clarify her priorities and goals.

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MEASURES OF SUCCESS

Shalwitz and Herrmann noted several general measures of success, including seeing full houses of vital audience members and achieving healthy revenue figures. They pointed out that understanding what qualifies as success in one instance may not be the case in another. While one production may receive critical acclaim, another show that does not receive the same accolades may still result in having an important Connectivity impact. Another measure of success is the level of engagement that occurs with the lobby activities that are designed for each show. Robust interaction lets the theatre know that the Connectivity concept is moving in the right direction. Staff mentioned that seeing people engage in conversation with fellow audience members about ideas sparked by the lobby design is a sign of success.

Weisfield could not offer data that measure success. However, she said that she looks for “explosive engagement” around these programs, and added that she can feel the excitement and see the investment from WMTC’s patrons. She said she reads what the press prints about the theatre. She also said she observes how people are engaging. For example, when she sat in postshow discussions and heard people talking with each other in a civic space, she saw this interchange of dialogue as a positive measure of success.

Prince measured success by the extent to which the organization is able to attract targeted patron groups to particular shows. She also observed whether or not audience members participated in the engagement activities offered. Finally, she assessed whether or not program partners were pleased with the partnership experience.

Board members Scott Schreiber, Pete Miller and J. Chris Babb cited audience diversity (age, socioeconomic, ethnic), overall audience growth, increased subscription numbers and outreach/connection with typically non-theatregoing community members as potential indicators of success. Additionally, they cited the use of the theatre facility as a place for conversations on civic topics as a success measure.

WMTC staff did not report any formal system to measure success of the strategies covered in this report. Prince said she does not have time to do so, nor to set goals in a formalized way due to time constraints. She said most of her time is devoted to executing activities and the rest to relationship building; she would like to reverse this. Other staff said that they are working on more specifically defining what they want the outcomes of their efforts to be, but that the theatre does not have the time and resources (people) to take on this responsibility.

However, in 2013 the theatre created a Connectivity Measurements report assembled by an intern from the University of Chicago's Booth School of Business. The report concluded that time must be taken to better track the work being done with Connectivity efforts. The report identified “placing a greater emphasis on measurement in the Connectivity department” as a goal for 2013–14. Opportunities for better measurement included lobby experience surveying (methodology issues), event participation (inconsistent tracking) and promotional code usage (inconsistent tracking).

In the 2013–14 season, WMTC implemented several of these measurement solutions. The marketing department introduced streamlined surveying, and added an emphasis on tracking event attendance and response. The theatre also began using and tracking promotional code usage via Tessitura.

Additionally, WMTC administered surveys to audience members of the following shows: The Elaborate Entrance of Chad Deity, You for Me for You, The Pajama Men: In the Middle of No One, The Convert, American Utopias and Stupid Fucking Bird. The survey asked if patrons found the show relevant to them, to what degree they felt connected to activities associated with the play, their opinion about the production and to what degree they participated in lobby activities. With this information now in hand, it can be compared to information the organization receives in the future.
LESSONS LEARNED: BENEFITS TO THE FIELD

“Connectivity is centered on the metaphor of an exploration that fuels a sense of excitement. Art is the spark...that’s Connectivity. Woolly Mammoth works to break down barriers.”

—Scott Schreiber, board president

After operating the Connectivity program for four years, the organization identified a number of best practices.

First among them is that good partnerships bring new contributors and fresh intellectual capital.

In addition to meeting constituents in their space, it is important to go out beyond the theatre's four walls and engage from the patron’s vantage point in other meeting spaces/places. WMTC values two-way relationships with partners, which, according to staff, means going to partners’ events and learning about partners’ work to properly plan collaborations.

Staff described the organization’s lobby engagement efforts as working well. They have determined what they called the “sweet spot” between “fun and voluntary” versus “compulsory” engagement. Getting to this point required exploration until the correct mix was found. The “sweet spot” according to staff is a lobby design that engages different types of spectators, providing enough variety for audience members to self-select what intrigues them. Staff also indicated that physical, emotional and intellectual space needs to be considered in the design of the lobby, so that individuals have enough room to personalize the content and have control over their own experience.

Shalwitz indicated that WMTC’s Connectivity approach has changed the theatre’s play selection process. The theatre does not program a play if the staff cannot foresee community activities that can be connected to it. In other words, a change in focus has had an impact what ends up on the stage.

Interviewees also advised giving careful thought as to when it’s best to keep the audience-engagement effort/activity “simple.” Sometimes a simple strategy can be the most effective.

Weisfield also noted that patrons are intelligent, and the community has much to teach the organization. As a dramaturg who leads postshow discussions, she shared that at times there are people in the audience who know more about the topic then she does. The theatre values learning that flows from the community to the institution and vice versa. A final learning from Weisfield was that if a strategy that worked at one time ceases to be effective it’s fine to let it go. Prince learned that it’s acceptable to take risks and O.K. to fail. Additionally, some chaos is fine.

Board members also shared lessons learned and stated that it’s O.K. if some of the conversations among constituents are uncomfortable, as long as they are “real.” They valued the energy in controversy, and were pleased that the subject matter of some of WMTC’s plays spurred a myriad of conversations, with audience members sharing diverse viewpoints.
ORGANIZATIONAL COMMITMENT

With the decision to embrace the Connectivity concept, Shalwitz and Herrmann deemed it important that the Connectivity director come on board as a senior staff position. With this new layer of participation, the various departments were still continuing to figure out how they should be working on audience-engagement efforts, and in what ways they should work together.

Interviewees described WMTC’s organizational commitment to audience engagement as top-down. Staff described observing buy-in from all parties, which brought them closer together. Prince reported this structure was working because it was all-inclusive and allowed for staff members to have a sense of ownership around what the theatre is doing.

When asked about the level of implementation required to bring these programs/events to fruition, Shalwitz said that it depends on the project; some projects have a number of components and therefore require more effort.

Weisfield and Prince confirmed the theatre’s keen commitment to audience development, as demonstrated by the creation of the Connectivity director position. Prince described her job as a special brand of audience engagement and community outreach that is very distinct to Woolly. It was based around the artistic director’s vision for WMTC as a place for the creation of innovative new plays, but also a place for dialogue, discourse, activism and civic engagement—a community space. She said she looked for ways to make connections between the play and their audiences, the artist and staff, bringing people together around the shows they do. While it is ultimately her job to ensure activity takes place, the success of the endeavors is a team effort.

Organizational commitment also caused the organization to reconsider its priorities. When WMTC started the Connectivity program, the theatre ended its education department/programming. The company took an unusually broad view of education, and chose not to segregate efforts targeted at young people from those that pertain to audience members in general.

Board members interviewed described themselves as very involved at WMTC. Most members volunteered to join “Connectivity” working groups around particular projects. These groups were a mix of staff, board and community volunteers, who acted as a sounding board for the Connectivity staff. They discussed what aspects of the play may be interesting enough to build engagement actions around.
BACKGROUND

This case study is part of TCG’s Audience (R)Evolution Program, which is designed to study, promote and support successful audience-engagement models. The program will take place over three years and include four phases: Assessment, Learning Convening, Grants and Dissemination.

As part of the research phase, AMS prepared eight case studies on theatre companies that have incorporated audience engagement as a fundamental component of their service delivery and institutional mission. The focus was to understand “success” for these theatres’ audience-engagement efforts and to comprehend the journey and outcome of their efforts. The eight companies are:

- Arkansas Repertory Theatre, Little Rock, AR
- HERE Arts Center, New York, NY
- Long Wharf Theatre, New Haven, CT
- Oregon Shakespeare Festival, Ashland, OR
- Steppenwolf Theatre Company, Chicago, IL
- The Theater Offensive, Boston, MA
- Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company, Washington, DC
- Youth Speaks, San Francisco, CA

More information about the study is available by emailing AudienceRev@tcg.org.

ABOUT WOOLLY MAMMOTH

MISSION: To ignite an explosive engagement between theatre artists and the community by developing, producing and promoting new plays that explore the edges of theatrical style and human experience, and by implementing new ways to use the artistry of theatre to serve the people of Greater Washington, DC.

Founded in 1980, and now in its 35th season, Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company is known nationally for its development of new plays. WMTC is a 501(c)(3) organization and has an annual operating budget of $4 million. The organization has 23 full-time staff and 21 board members. Artistic Director Howard Shalwitz is one of the founders.

Almost half of WMTC’s plays are world premieres. The bulk of the others are second or third productions, the latter providing an environment for playwrights to see their scripts further polished. Over the years, plays premiered at WMTC have been performed at more than 200 theatres (in 39 states and 12 countries). The institution has had 17 of its plays commercially published.

The theatre is very enthusiastic about its Free the Beast initiative, which will support, over a ten-year time frame (2013-22), the full production of 25 new plays on the WMTC stage. While some of the productions will be brand new, others will be early drafts that will now have the benefit of full production. The productions will benefit from a wide array of support ranging from working with WMTC’s skilled actors, to readings, workshops, research, large casts, extra rehearsals and access to technical expertise.

WMTC also has a program called House Lights Up, which is curated by the Connectivity department, and designed as interactive panels and conversations in which patrons can participate. Additionally, the theatre has an intern program and welcomes the support of volunteers.

In 2005 WMTC moved into its permanent facility, a $9-million space with a 265-seat, courtyard-style theatre.

www.woollymammoth.net
ABOUT AMS
AMS Planning & Research, a national arts management consulting firm, has been engaged by TCG to provide research expertise for this project. For more than 25 years, AMS has been supporting the success of the arts and cultural sector through applied research and strategy development. AMS prepared eight case studies on theatre companies that have incorporated audience engagement as a fundamental component of their service delivery and institutional mission and have adequate results to support their assertions of success. The companies were selected based on a review of research data and recommendations by TCG leadership. AMS compiled research data on each theatre, studied grant reporting and conducted site visits to interview a broad array of staff, lay leadership and audience-engagement program participants.
www.ams-online.com

ABOUT TCG
Theatre Communications Group (TCG), the national organization for the American theatre, was founded in 1961 with a grant from the Ford Foundation to foster communication among professional, community and university theatres. Today, TCG’s constituency has grown from a handful of groundbreaking theatres to nearly 700 Member Theatres and Affiliate organizations and more than 12,000 individuals nationwide. TCG’s mission is to strengthen, nurture and promote the professional not-for-profit American theatre.
www.tcg.org

APPENDIX
I. RESEARCH APPROACH
Earlier in the research process, based on an extensive literature review, AMS defined five Audience-Engagement Strategy Clusters, designed to organize a theatre’s tactics, support more productive collaboration and suggest underexplored approaches. While a theatre’s strategies may be represented by more than one group (two is most common), the majority of strategies deployed are dominant in a single one. The five Audience-Engagement Strategy Clusters are:

1. SEGMENT Strategies
Defining and refining the intended person to be served by the institution’s work.

2. VENUE/PATH Strategies
Rethinking the place where people engage with the organization’s work and the road they follow to find it.

3. RELATIONSHIP Strategies
Building or enhancing the personal relationships the organization has with its community.

4. INCOME Strategies
Redesigning the financial exchange: who pays, how much, for what, for whom.

5. CONTENT Strategies
Doing different work, rather than doing current work differently.
## II. INSTITUTIONAL PROGRAM SURVEY TABLE

These tables, which were provided by the theatre, indicate which specific strategies from among the five Audience-Engagement Strategy Clusters apply to each of the programs covered in this case study.

### PROJECT 1

**Connectivity** is a new community-engagement strategy at Woolly that seeks to tailor a unique audience experience to the needs and opportunities presented by each production on our stage in an effort to connect Woolly more deeply to our community.

### GOALS

1. Build audiences for our work.
2. Diversify audiences for our work.
3. Deepen the audience's experience of our work.
4. Matter to our community in a more fundamental way.
5. Change the perception of theatre from entertainment to a platform for civic dialogue.

### STRATEGIES

1. Cultivate new audience members that mirror our current audience base.
2. Cultivate culturally specific new audiences.
3. Cultivate age-specific new audiences.
4. Cultivate underserved new audiences.
5. Build audiences by use of traditional performance space(s).
6. Develop personal connections through online presence.
7. Subsidize ticket prices through sponsorships.
8. Offer discounts to specific groups.
9. Develop new social programs/initiatives.
10. Develop community pride in the theatre.
For more information on TCG’s **Audience (R)Evolution Program** please contact AudienceRev@tcg.org or visit www.tcg.org.

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