



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.

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INTRODUCTION

Youth Speaks is a not-for-profit presenter of spoken-word education, youth development and presentation programs that serves approximately 200,000 youth in California's Bay Area and nationally each year. At its core, the organization is dedicated to enabling young people to have a voice. This case study examines several engagement strategies undertaken by Youth Speaks to redefine the ways its core constituency interacts with the organization; create partnerships that support more widespread engagement; and develop pathways for youth to become leaders.

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 April and March 2013.

CASE STUDY

"We always encourage young poets to be true to who they are. Poetry is not a distant art form in this context."

—James Kass, Founder and Executive Director

The overall goals of the initiatives described in this case study center around creating opportunities for young people to articulate their views on the world and current issues. Youth Speaks adopted the following three specific organizational strategies covered in this case study to support these goals:

- 1. Develop enhanced digital platforms to redefine the way youth engage with Youth Speaks.**
- 2. Develop a community of organizations invested in spoken-word poetry as a means to engage youth.**
- 3. Engage and foster youth leaders.**

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

CAST OF CHARACTERS

The case study included interviews with the following individuals:

James Kass, Founder and Executive Director

Joan Osato, Producing Director

Hodari Bayano Davis, National Program Director

Niles Xi'an Lichtenstein, board member and former Youth Speaks participant

Jeff Chang, community member and current program parent

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STRATEGIES

STRATEGY 1

Develop enhanced digital platforms to redefine the way youth engage with Youth Speaks.

"Our constituency of young artists and audience members are digital natives that naturally engage with ever-evolving communications tools, which is the basis for our strategic move toward building up our digital assets and resources."

—Joan Osato, Founding Artistic Director

At the time of the case study, Founder and Executive Director James Kass reported that Youth Speaks was in the midst of building an enhanced digital strategy through an improved initiative that would encompass all of its online activities, called "I Live Here." The organization had already gained significant national visibility, namely through HBO-partnered video projects, and wanted to take greater ownership over its digital identity and mirror its live program experiences online. The organization had already developed significant authority in social media and online networks by creating and implementing web-based platforms that have allowed their remote audiences to access the company's work. Staff was searching for other ways to strengthen this online space as a new "stage" for performers and audiences, as well an arts education "classroom" for youth.

As a part of "I Live Here," the organization was preparing to launch a project that would digitally map the changing demographics of the United States through spoken word and theatre, further enhancing its capacity to implement audience-engagement strategies for youth. Created through a partnership with Robert Redford and the Redford Center, the project was designed to spark conversation between disparate communities of young people about issues affecting them locally, such as diabetes and the high school dropout rate. It entailed an interactive online map of the country, with each individual youth and their story representing "an active organism in the nation's ecosystem." The project empowered young people to represent themselves in a location (environment) instantly, which served to inspire other young people to claim their location and share their story. The staff acknowledged that it would take time to collect, edit and publish the stories for the map. At the time of the case study, the map was available online and staff had plans to ramp up publicity efforts around it when they accumulated a critical mass of stories. Youth Speaks staff hoped that the map would contribute to participants' sense of inclusion in a global community of change-makers.

While still largely in a dialog with the board's Digital Committee and others to determine how best to translate its programs to the online environment, the company had identified several concrete plans/elements that were underway at the time of the case study, or seemed possible in the near future for the digital map:

- **Provide workshops for artists on participation and user navigation.**
- **Help artists develop likely work and hone presentations for performance and filming.**
- **Publicize outreach for the map with special marketing.**

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STRATEGY 2

Develop a community of organizations invested in spoken-word poetry as a means to engage youth.

“How do we create communities and audiences—reciprocity? Call and response! True community building.”

—Joan Osato, Founding Artistic Director

Osato and National Program Director Hodari Bayano Davis both spoke about this strategy primarily in the context of the annual Brave New Voices International Youth Poetry Slam Festival (BNV). BNV takes place over five days each summer in a different city, supported by a network of organizations and powered by Youth Speaks. To support the project, Youth Speaks has generated strong partnerships between diverse and underserved communities, green action agencies, local community groups, urban environment activists and the contemporary arts world. The festival invites young people to take part in as many as 30 workshops and 50 events, with more than 500 young writers in attendance.

“Local partners keep the festival relevant in their communities,” Kass said. The organization has striven to develop how-to models that can be adaptively implemented by others in the right context for their community. Youth Speaks authors a template for BNV, which provides a structural frame for partners, anchoring the festival with a theme, capacity-building workshops and pillar events. Partners helped to choose venues, organize local street teams and staff filmmakers, production teams and local teaching artists.

Osato noted that Youth Speaks partners with a major university and other key arts organizations and gave as an example the summer 2013 Brave New Voices festival in Chicago. The company engaged with the University of Chicago, Young Chicago Authors, Kumbalinks, the DeSabo Museum and Auditorium Theater. Many of these organizations had well-reputed in-school education programs, so in partnering Youth Speaks gained access to those populations by easy extension.

Youth Speaks has taken a leadership role in Brave New Voices by way of the following:

- **Providing an online fundraising strategy and portal;**
- **Disseminating pedagogy at Brave New Voices festivals during sessions designed for organizational leadership;**
- **Community-building through participation in the arts (40 events over five days);**
- **Providing strategic-planning workshops;**
- **Ongoing surveys via online portal to gauge success.**

These efforts also extended to Youth Speaks’s Life Is Living festivals. For example, hundreds of arts and cross-sector organizations work on this project in Oakland each year. The festival is the physical face of extensive collaborative work that takes place throughout the year.

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STRATEGY 3

Engage and foster youth leaders.

Interviewees discussed this strategy primarily in the context of the Brave New Voices program.

In 2009, the staff of the Brave New Voices Festival returned from Chicago exhausted, having themselves run 60 percent of the festival, which consisted of 45 to 50 events over five days. Without resources to hire additional staff, Youth Speaks opted to devise a new model, which the organization put in place the following year. Youth Speaks recruited 20 BNV alumni between the ages of 19 and 23 from all over the country, including one coordinator and one director—the only two paid staff. The others received meals and housing, but were responsible for providing their own transportation to the festival. The group, called the “Future Corps,” arrived the week prior to the festival for training and provided help in running the festival. Kass described Future Corps participants as “a body of alumni across the nation who really run the festival, because they plan and execute the collaborative partnerships.”

A key goal was to train Future Corps participants to run and organize events, create documentation as needed, assist with production and stage management tasks, and to lay the groundwork for participation in future leadership opportunities.

SUCCESSSES

Youth Speaks defined success in part as seeding the next generation of leadership in the arts and more broadly in American society. Staff suggested that organizations that work with young people need to create spaces for their youth to engage in every way possible—artistically, organizationally and administratively. They have seen a generation of young leaders around the country who have gone through their programs, which indicates great potential for future leadership.

Brave New Voices attempted to establish and maintain a global movement of artists, activists and educators who advance social justice issues and issues of community-building in their work and art, and thus success is reflected in the number and depth of partnerships that support this goal. Staff reported being surprised and pleased that partnership requests have remained high during recent economic times. There was more demand than the organization can support. Youth Speaks has been in the position of asking affiliate organizations (75 in all) to contribute more to their own regional network-building, as well as to think long term regarding their own organizational growth and what they will need to do to be prepared and successfully move forward.

Regarding Future Corps, staff reported that this model had worked amazingly well, with more requests for subsequent-year assignments than could be accommodated. Many of the participants have gained employment, both inside and outside of the Youth Speaks national network, as a result of their Future Corps training.

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CHALLENGES

Youth Speaks's biggest obstacle is a lack of adequate resources. The organization had limited national staff, so they depended on people at their partner organizations in other cities. Visiting artists and production people were paid, but much of every initiative was supported by broad volunteer efforts. Many alumni are brought on to Youth Speaks as full-time staff at Youth Speaks so, according to Kass, there is at times a bumpy transition developing its constituents into employees.

Kass noted that planning for "I Live Here" has been very labor intensive, taking staff and management away from other roles such as fundraising, programs and operations. Staff members were surprised at the amount of effort working on the digital platform had taken. Despite success getting grants to support ongoing work and new programs, every new initiative had to be tightly balanced with core program support.

The Future Corps program faced some early transitional challenges. These included getting participants on board with online communication tools. There was also a good deal of resistance to the plan inside the Youth Speaks organization, with a fear of too many cooks being in the kitchen.

In the past the local San Francisco-based Youth Board, SPOKES (ages 14 to 18), had traveled for free to each BNV festival as "ambassadors" for the program. Future Corps, a group of more skilled workers, displaced them and caused resentment. This remained a problem until the individual SPOKES members rotated off the Youth Board.

MEASURE OF SUCCESS

As standard practice, Youth Speaks assessed projects in numerous ways to measure their impact. The organization commissioned research and assessment of its various models. While funders may require specific models for evaluation, the organization also set up internal measures to assure alignment of programs with the organization's core mission.

As an example, the company offered the following criteria to measure the network-building goal for Brave New Voices:

- **Increase the number of participating organizations by at least two per year.**
- **Achieve high marks according to evaluation tools (see below).**
- **Retain partners over the year.**
- **Report organizational growth or program refinement over the year.**

To gather feedback the company solicited detailed post-event evaluations on all aspects of Brave New Voices—logistics, lodging, each event and workshops—from all participants using a rating system, with additional fields for unstructured anecdotal information as well. Other evaluation tools were in development.

In addition to formal feedback, Youth Speaks found it important to look at the purpose and goals of the work they were doing with all of their community partners, and to revisit the strategies to discuss whether they were successful. Osato believed that having a direct conversation with their partners was essential to find out what was successful and how they benefited from the project. Staff was working to formalize a process to do this through a series of interim meetings and have received grants to arrange convenings with partners to discuss leadership development and model-sharing. The first of these sessions was held in San Francisco in January 2014.

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"I Live Here" is not far enough along for specific design of evaluation tools, but staff discussed several possible ways to measure its success:

- **Development of media pieces for dissemination;**
- **Positive youth response to media;**
- **Increased participation of youth in submitting media for broadcast through online (invitation) platform.**

The company also collected substantial data for the Living Word Project each year. These included the number of performances and other outreach events, attendees, organizations involved and artist contracts. The company compiled lists of the national performers for each season (e.g., 27 in 2011-12), along with the number of repertory performances or other engagement events at each location. The company solicits audience comments linked to specific program goals at many performances.

Anecdotal evidence indicated many successful young community leaders have come out of Youth Speaks programs, and Jeff Chang, a current program parent, noted that these intangibles may be even more important than "old-school kinds of measurements." He said that measures for community-building should be considered as well. While difficult to assess, Chang said he believes that educational outcomes and civic engagement were improving, and the sense of alienation was declining in communities touched by Youth Speaks. Key questions included, What is the long-term impact? Are they teaching future teachers? Kass also noted that more informal or qualitative means for gauging success might be based on tools and responses being developed in "I Live Here."

REPLICATION OPPORTUNITIES

Youth Speaks's core programs recur every year; there is a built-in opportunity for course corrections based on feedback, as well as successive longer-term assessment. Several of the organization's educational programs have been emulated by its growing network of affiliate organizations, sharing, adapting and testing ideas in many different cities.

LESSONS LEARNED: BENEFITS TO THE FIELD

Osato asserted that many elements of what Youth Speaks has learned in the Brave New Voices initiative can translate well to more traditional theatre companies. The company aimed to establish safe and uncensored space for young people to create and perform, but they also mentor and teach youth to be responsible and respectful as they communicate with one another. Sharing knowledge might be useful to others, but the company does not put a lot of effort into articulating a successful model and distributing it. Youth Speaks does not have the resources to publish a paper or create an online platform where they can disseminate information—but staff indicated they would like to.

Partnerships and strong communication have been key to Youth Speaks's successes. As Davis explained, Youth Speaks was ego-driven in its early days, like many arts organizations. By 2008, triggered by an interest in how different organizations in their circle of partners approached various challenges, as well as reduced resources during an economic downturn, he began to more clearly understand how their objectives were consistent with others', and began developing more partnerships.

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The Brave New Voices festival held in Washington, DC, the following summer was the perfect trial for this strategy. The organization engaged in collaborative partnerships with organizations such as the Kennedy Center. Kass said, "There's no shortcut to relationship-building." What each partner gave varied based on the interests and sizes of the organizations. Organizational partners contributed by giving staff time, restaurants donated food and some universities provided housing and venues. After the Life Is Living festivals got started, Youth Speaks changed its role, repositioning the organization as host for the space rather than the programmer of the space, while continuing to coach participants and support best practices.

ORGANIZATIONAL COMMITMENT

In many senses, Youth Speaks is not a typical theatre organization. Kass said, "As a first principle, virtually everything we do is defined by audience engagement. The spoken-word genre requires an audience. It can't function in a vacuum." The company's outreach directors specifically focus on advancing audience engagement, and every staff member, including the 150 artists working for the company, also participate in audience engagement as a large part of what they do at the company. All of the 58 individuals, including artists, technicians and designers, touring with Youth Speaks's Living Word Project do outreach and residencies with local constituencies, as well as engage in marketing and promotion for the work.

Furthermore, audience engagement is embedded into every Youth Speaks program. Senior staff developed key strategies along with local program directors, the executive director, board members and other advisors who work in the field. The strategies are vetted by staff and board leadership, refined if necessary and, if accepted, articulated through program directors and carried out via direct-service staff, i.e., artists and educators.

A festival as large as BNV requires a great deal of preplanning, especially when so many partner organizations are involved. This means creating a project-planning committee each year, conducting a project-specific fundraising campaign, restructuring current programming based on previous-year feedback and collaborating with artists, programming partners and stakeholders where the festival takes place. Three Youth Speaks staff members devote some of their time to this effort throughout the year. Eighty people work full time during the festival, including staff, volunteers and paid contractors.

While the board does not play a large role in the creation of specific Youth Speaks programs, they are engaged and involved with all of the flagship programs. They bring connections, resources and support to the work of the organization.

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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 YOUTH SPEAKS

MISSION: Youth Speaks creates safe spaces that empower the next generation of leaders, self-defined artists and visionary activists through written and oral literacies. We challenge youth to find, develop, publicly present and apply their voices as creators of societal change. Our vision is to shift the perceptions of youth by combating illiteracy, alienation and silence, creating a global movement of brave new voices bringing the noise from the margins into the core.

Youth Speaks is a not-for-profit presenter of spoken-word education, youth development and presentation programs founded in 1996 by Executive Director James Kass. From its home base in San Francisco, the organization provides a variety of highly innovative programs throughout California's Bay Area and the entire country, serving approximately 200,000 youth nationally each year. In the Bay Area, the company's programs touch more than 40,000 young people (ages 13 to 24) annually. Youth Speaks has an annual operating budget of \$2 million.

The first national Youth Speaks Teen Poetry Slam, featuring 43 young poets, took place in San Francisco in 1997. Youth Speaks's programs have grown to include youth writing workshops, creative and performance mentoring, non-competitive performance opportunities and job skills training, along with theatre development, civic engagement and youth development programs.

Over the past 17 years, Youth Speaks has helped to build more than 40 affiliate programs nationally. Some have become significant independent organizations, e.g., Urban Word NY, Youth Speaks Seattle, Youth Speaks Hawaii, Youth Speaks Wisconsin, Youth Speaks Nashville and Youth Speaks Sacramento. As all of these organizations were launched, Youth Speaks raised initial money, gave models for program design, served as fiscal sponsors and even paid some early staff salaries; now each operates independently, raising their own money and adopting program models to their local communities, although Youth Speaks still provides substantial leadership support and convening opportunities.

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Three major flagship programs have become the core activities of Youth Speaks:

Brave New Voices (BNV) is both an annual festival and a network of national organizations committed to the voices of the next generation. Following on the success of the first Youth Speaks Teen Poetry Slam, the Brave New Voices International Youth Poetry Slam Festival (BNV) now takes place over five days each summer in a different city. Participants have come from Canada, Africa, the Polynesian Islands and Europe. In a recent year, 500 youth from 50 cities participated in 25 events in 14 venues. Cities send teams of their top four to six youth poets between the ages of 13 and 19 to compete in front of large audiences and juries of arts professionals. More than 10,000 people have attended recent BNV festivals as audience members, with 75 percent of them between the ages of 13 and 39. In bringing together young outspoken artists, educators, poets and emerging leaders, these convenings offer diversity and open expression as core values and create a setting where people can gather and learn about one another more deeply. This annual poetry slam festival draws corporate support and national media coverage.

The **Living Word Project** was created in 1999 by Artistic Director Marc Bamuthi Joseph as Youth Speaks's resident theatre company committed to producing literary performances in the verse of our time and furthering a new aesthetic in theatre which includes dance, music and film, in addition to the company's emphasis in spoken storytelling. Content for the work grows out of current important social issues. The Living Word Project tours repertory pieces nationally, sending artists out across the country to colleges and conferences.

Life Is Living has established a new arts festival model that focuses on partnerships between diverse and under-resourced communities, green action agencies and the contemporary arts world. Begun in 2008 under the artistic direction of Marc Bamuthi Joseph, Life Is Living has grown from a small community festival that uses the arts to foster local communication and environmental justice to a national campaign that is much larger in scope. It is free to attend Life Is Living festivals, and to date the program has taken place in Harlem, Chicago, Houston and Oakland, with further work proposed in Philadelphia, San Francisco and the Twin Cities. These local festivals typically involve a traveling environmental caucus and concert, an invitational graffiti battle, live action sports, sustainable materials construction projects and a Speak Green youth poetry event—all done with the help of many local organizational partners.

Several other programs that reflect specific aspects of social engagement among the young poets and their audiences have also been developed through special partnerships in recent years:

Through a partnership with Robert Redford and the Redford Center, Youth Speaks has engaged its young poets in the conversation around critical environmental issues in its **"I Live Here"** program. This initiative has had a digital component as well as a performative one.

The Bigger Picture is an initiative focused to bring attention to Type 2 Diabetes.

The **Off/Page Project** represents an unusual partnership with the Center for Investigative Reporting involving the development of a media platform for young people to investigate the issues and stories that might otherwise be silenced.

Youth Speaks's "In School" programs include residencies by Youth Speaks artists, artist performances and classroom visits, and coaching for school-based poetry and school district poetry slam clubs. "Out of School" programs include free after-school workshops that run for 5 to 10 weeks and sponsorship of "under-21 open mic" events. Mentoring and paid internship programs also provide professional development coaching and development.

www.youthspeaks.org

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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 **people** 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.

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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

Through a partnership with Robert Redford and the Redford Center, Youth Speaks has recently created a new digital platform, "I Live Here," to help create opportunities for a new generation of articulate, thoughtful, engaged, knowledgeable and unafraid-to-speak leaders to emerge, making local and global communities healthier places to live.

GOALS

1. Create opportunities for young people to articulate their views on the world and current issues.

STRATEGIES

1. Develop an online platform/website to house the project.
2. Hire staff to develop web and media elements.
3. Hold workshops for Youth Speaks artists to understand the project.
4. Help artists develop likely work for the project and hone their presentations for performance and filming.
5. Develop a specific marketing plan around the project to publicize it and achieve outreach goals.

PROJECT 2

Life Is Living is a national campaign of Youth Speaks that generates partnerships between diverse and underserved communities, green action agencies, local community groups, urban environmental activists and the contemporary arts world.

GOALS

Goals not articulated.

STRATEGIES

Strategies not articulated.

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PROJECT 3

The Brave New Voices National Network consists of organizations mutually invested in spoken-word poetry as a vehicle to develop the cultural, academic and civic literacies of youth. Partner organizations reflect a diversity of grassroots, small and mid-size organizations.

GOALS

- 1. Increase network-building.

STRATEGIES

- 1. Provide an online fundraising strategy and portal.
- 2. Disseminate pedagogy at Brave New Voices annual festival sessions designed for organizational leadership.
- 3. Build community through participation in the arts at Brave New Voices annual festivals.
- 4. Lead strategic-planning workshops for the Brave New Voices network.
- 5. Conduct ongoing surveys via the Youth Speaks online portal to gauge success.

For more information on TCG's **Audience (R)Evolution Program** please contact AudienceRev@tcg.org or visit www.tcg.org.

RESEARCH

AMS Planning & Research Corp

CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

Ben Pesner

COPY EDITOR

Sarah Hart

PROJECT MANAGEMENT

Kevin E. Moore, Managing Director, TCG; Emilyya Cachapero, Director of Artistic & International Programs, TCG; Kevin Bitterman, Associate Director of Artistic & International Programs, TCG; and Soriya Chum, Project Assistant

DESIGN

Monet Cogbill, Associate Art Director, TCG

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