Case Studies

steppenwolf

Audience (R) Evolution

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Steppenwolf Theatre Company
CHICAGO, IL

INTRODUCTION

Among **Steppenwolf Theatre Company**'s primary institutional goals are to connect audiences more closely with the work onstage, particularly new work, and to position the theatre at the center of important civic conversations. Specifically, the company wants to erase distinctions between subscribers and single-ticket buyers who had been coming for years and to better address critical teen-related issues. This report spotlights three strategies undertaken in support of these goals.

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. The time frame covered by this case study is Steppenwolf's 37th Season (2012-13).

CASE STUDY

Chicago's Steppenwolf Theatre Company is an artist-driven theatre that sees itself as a "Public Square," using its work onstage to drive important civic discourse. The theatre's staff realized that single-ticket buyers who had been coming to Steppenwolf for years were just as invested in the theatre as subscribers. They wanted to erase distinctions between the groups and be more intentional about creating a community conversation around its productions, especially new work. The company also engaged in an effort to broaden its extensive teen programs by partnering with community organizations.

Specific organizational strategies discussed as part of this case study were:

1. **Expand postshow opportunities for the public to interact with artists and other professionals around the theatre's sometimes controversial work.**

2. **Support artistic work more effectively through multiple digital communication platforms.[1]**

3. **Work in partnership with other organizations to address critical teen-related issues.**

Of the five Audience-Engagement Strategy Clusters developed as part of this overall research effort (see Research Approach, page 10), those in alignment with Steppenwolf's efforts were the Relationship (#1, #2, and #3, above) and Segment[2](#3, above) strategies.

As part of the research effort, Steppenwolf completed an institutional survey sharing the goals and strategies associated with three of its audience-engagement programs. Tables detailing this information appear in the appendix to this case study.

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[1] Over the long term, digital activity is also seen as a potential Income Strategy.

[2] It's important to note that underlying all this work is a Venue Strategy (the "Public Square"),which rethinks how the building and the institution relate to the community.

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

The case study included interviews with the following individuals:

Martha Lavey, Artistic Director

David Hawkanson, Executive Director

Aaron Carter, Director of New Play Development

John Zinn, Director of Marketing and Communications

Thomas Weitz, Digital Assets Manager

Hallie Gordon, Artistic & Educational Director for Steppenwolf Young Adults

Beth Davis, board member and retired attorney

Lynn Lockwood Murphy, board member and former Director of Special Projects, Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs

STRATEGIES

STRATEGY 1
Expand postshow opportunities for the public to interact with artists and other professionals around the theatre's sometimes controversial work.

Like many theatres, Steppenwolf regularly uses postshow discussions as a vehicle for interacting with audiences. However, its approach has evolved over time to something more than the traditional question-and-answer format, and the number of postshow discussions increased from weekly discussions to nightly discussions. When Steppenwolf produced Bruce Norris's controversial play *The Pain and the Itch* in 2005, the theatre's artistic staff decided to conduct postshow discussions after every performance, in order to give all audiences a chance to discuss anything anxiety-producing about the show. Surprisingly to the company, audiences did not focus on the play's controversial content as much as on its structural and thematic elements. This led Steppenwolf to consider expanding postshow discussion in future seasons.

"We want audiences to play a more interpretive role," said Artistic Director Martha Lavey. Discussions are led by staff, not by the performing artists; interviewees believed that artist-led discussions tended to set up a hierarchy of experts. There is nothing ad hoc about Steppenwolf's postshow discussions. Staff is trained in "a kind of moderator boot-camp," as Hallie Gordon, Artistic & Educational Director for Steppenwolf Young Adults, put it, where they prepare to facilitate conversations in a way that sparks dialogue among audience members. Discussions take an interactive focus, giving audience members the opportunity to speak to one another about what they took away from the show. Staff is careful not to tell audiences what they should talk about. According to Gordon, the moderator puts the audience in the driver's seat to grapple with what new work means. Moderators start postshow discussions by asking questions intended to activate audience members' personal experience of the show. Typical questions include, "What are you sitting with right now?" or "How are you engaging with this on a personal level?" Moderators ask the audience what resonated with them and build the discussion from there; gradually, they guide the conversation toward addressing the broader themes of the show.

Director of New Play Development Aaron Carter is responsible for organizing the postshow discussions, and the artistic staff—along with six outside facilitators—split the facilitation role throughout a given run. Carter has developed a format for the discussions and moderators meet at the beginning of each production run to consider ideas that are likely

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to emerge in the conversations. Each moderator (who is paid for the work) crafts his or her own questions, but they are trained to take the lead from the audience. Carter sits in on several early discussions, and moderators report back to the group after the first two sessions. Often moderators have the opportunity to meet with playwrights and other artists prior to a run as part of their preparation.

STRATEGY 2
Support artistic work more effectively through multiple digital communication platforms.

When Steppenwolf's digital assets department was first established, Thomas Weitz said, it was not well integrated into the organization. That has improved over time, and as the company has begun to embrace social media as an engagement platform, the work Weitz's department covers has grown to include video (show trailers, artist profiles and audience reaction), podcasts, photo galleries, website and social media management, email, mobile apps and other services.

Like staff in other departments, Weitz said he is committed to creating a relationship with patrons that extends beyond a transaction and offers multiple levels of engagement according to audience preference at a given moment. In social media, for example, an individual can simply read a post, or he/she can like, share or comment on it. He emphasizes the department is driven to be nimble and to provide audiences with information before, during and after each show in order to meet each segment of the Steppenwolf audience on its own terms. "If people engage more frequently," Weitz said, "they become more open to riskier work and more invested in the institution. We become more effective from a mission and financial point of view as a result."

Weitz described how his department operates. Digital content changes for every show. Two marketing associates provide content, identify concepts, set timelines and write copy for multichannel campaigns. Steppenwolf generates written content for every show, and sends between one and five patron emails per week. The company creates two to three videos and one podcast per show (the latter taken from a postshow discussion), posts on Facebook twice daily, posts on Twitter two to four times daily, creates at least two photo galleries per show and posts young artist and event videos. John Zinn, Director of Marketing and Communications, mentioned that while the response to the company's Twitter and Facebook presence was very strong, the podcasts did not attract many listeners. Zinn attributes the podcasts' low listenership to the repetitive content that was produced episode to episode. The staff added that although each episode focused on a different show within the season, the same interview format was used for all episodes, yielding similar responses from featured artists.

Of late, Steppenwolf's marketing focus has shifted toward so-called "millennials," and Weitz said he is working to bring the offerings of his department more in line with that audience segment's perceived values. He said this has meant redesigning the company's website to mirror the experience of coming to a show—incorporating values like surprise, delight and visceral response. According to Zinn, the redesign of the website involved adding more video and photo content, streamlining navigation and updating the web pages more frequently to attract and maintain the attention of young viewers.

STRATEGY 3
Work in partnership with other organizations to address critical teen-related issues.

To implement this strategy, Steppenwolf identified and then collaborated with outside partners to illuminate teen-centered issues and engage the public in conversation about them. In one key example, Steppenwolf joined in a partnership with the

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Chicago Public Library, DePaul University, several community organizations and other Chicago-based theatre companies that led to a citywide initiative called Now Is the Time.

The organizations designed Now Is the Time to give young people a platform to discuss youth violence and intolerance. Citing the disconnect between their organizations and surrounding neighborhoods, and knowing they could not simply assume people would come to them to coalesce around the violence issue, the partners consciously sought to include young people whose voices were typically left out of the public conversation.

One element of the theatre's involvement was a Steppenwolf for Young Adults program staging of a new adaptation by Heidi Stillman of Markus Zusak's 2006 novel *The Book Thief*. Steppenwolf also produced events at the theatre and toured shows throughout Chicago. The theatre held workshops and postshow discussions, hosted a master teacher workshop and conducted an immersion program through nine school residencies with teaching artists.

In addition, to enhance engagement around the staged adaptation of *The Book Thief*, Steppenwolf also partnered with the organization Facing History and Ourselves (*https://www.facinghistory.org/*). Facing History and Ourselves mounted a free multimedia exhibit at a Chicago library called "Choosing to Participate," which encouraged young people and adults to think deeply about the importance of participating in a democratic society. The partners connected the exhibit and the stage adaptation by establishing points of crossover in the curriculum.

Also under the umbrella of Now Is the Time, Steppenwolf worked with partners to create and produce a play about youth violence in Chicago, which was based on oral histories. *How Long Will I Cry* (2013), a piece woven together from interviews gathered by journalist Miles Harvey and his students at DePaul University, gave voice to teens who have experienced violence firsthand. Steppenwolf toured the play to library branches around the city.

Another project created for Now Is the Time was a youth-led forum on violence in Chicago called Teens at the Table. This group created a series of town hall meetings that drew audiences from all over the city to discuss youth violence. It was modeled on Steppenwolf's Young Adult Council, which provides 20 high school students with access to theatre professionals. Council participants meet once a week, attend shows, learn how to analyze and speak about these plays and lead events for their peers around Steppenwolf productions.

SUCCESSES

Steppenwolf's expansion of its postshow discussion program has been a success. Overall attendance has increased. "Our audience is eager and capable, and they're getting really good at this," said Lavey, and Carter described the postshow discussions as "a conversation among friends." That conversation now happens across seasons, with participants regularly making reference to past shows. Other indications of success include more robust and substantive conversations and increased tolerance for challenging work.

Steppenwolf also claims success in raising internal awareness of and pride in the important role digital media plays in building relationships with audiences. The fact that digital assets staff may interact with people from four or five departments on a given video shoot has helped build ownership and mutual respect within the organization. The visibility of Steppenwolf's artistic work has also increased thanks to digital efforts, and staff—who, in the past, were not part of the digital conversation—have begun to offer regular feedback on the website and other initiatives.

Staff reported huge impact from Now Is the Time and *How Long Will I Cry*. Staff and board members were deeply engaged,

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and there was extensive press coverage. In addition, a number of organizations contacted Steppenwolf offering to join the project. Now Is the Time reached many young people through peace rallies, social media, school assemblies and sold-out performances. Between 70 and 100 people attended each of four town meetings as part of Teens at the Table. *How Long Will I Cry* extended its run, and teachers sometimes returned with students to see the show again. Gordon said that the conversation within individual neighborhoods was significant, and she cited the multigenerational nature of the conversation as a key indicator of success. A book of oral histories came out of the project: *How Long Will I Cry: Voices of Youth Violence*.

CHALLENGES

Interviewees identified time constraints as the biggest hurdle in implementing postshow discussions. Staff had to manage scheduling challenges that arose regularly. Steppenwolf now trains front-of-house staff to step in should a moderator cancel at the last minute.

The digital assets department saw overcoming internal cultural barriers as a particular challenge. "It's easy for digital assets to feel like a tack-on," said Weitz, whose responsibilities included helping the staff consider best uses for digital technology. Although some staff members have questioned its efficacy, most were enthusiastic about using the department's resources. A particular challenge, however, was the perceived intrusion of video creation in the artistic process, namely, when taping occurred amid rehearsals. Weitz cautioned that it takes a great deal of work to build trust among artists.

Another ongoing challenge is the iterative nature of digital work. "We are constantly adjusting," said Weitz, "and nothing is ever finished because the audience changes. That's the whole promise of digital to audiences, and it poses challenges to our workflows every day." Originally, Steppenwolf assigned a rotating group of interns to manage its social media channels. As the importance of social media grew and its role within the company became more significant, the theatre hired an outside vendor to help manage the workload.

Now Is the Time was intense and challenging for Steppenwolf staff. At first, many inside the organization resisted the program. Some recommended keeping the project within the frame of regular programming, believing that Steppenwolf did not have the staff, time and financial resources to make it work. Because the project stemmed from a social justice rather than an artistic imperative, staff had to evaluate how important the project was to Steppenwolf and to the city—always a good question to ask, said Gordon. To counter these concerns, she started small and allowed time to accommodate other partners, so that Steppenwolf was not taking on all the responsibility alone. There were 12 other theatres involved, and Gordon said maintaining a healthy balance was difficult. "No matter how hard I tried to step back, it wasn't always possible," she said, "because if you go out recruiting partners, you're already setting yourself up as being in charge."

The project posed other challenges as well. Space was always an issue, as was creating appropriate messaging. Gordon noted the importance of communication in setting the right tone. "It couldn't just be Steppenwolf and the Library telling people how they should think about violence." In addition, the work was heavily time-consuming, and staff spent hours meeting with librarians, teachers and others to make them comfortable in knowing that the theatre was not just coming into their community and then leaving. "We had to build relationships so that they would trust us and our voice," Gordon said. In all, the project took three years of planning and one year of implementation.

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MEASURE OF SUCCESS

Measuring the success of postshow discussions is still a work in process at Steppenwolf, and anecdotal observation plays a huge role in evaluation. Among the measures the staff consider are attendance and frequency of attendance at postshow discussions. While they have seen a growth trend, it was difficult to draw conclusions, since attendance at postshow discussions is directly related to the house count on any given evening. The question of metrics, added Carter, "is at the forefront right now, and we acknowledge where our knowledge limits are." Carter said they are now beginning to think about how they structure activities like postshow discussions so that they can better understand what makes an approach successful.

Data supported claims of success in the digital media strategy. This included a reported increase in patron participation as measured by comments, shares, retweets, etc., as well as an increase in media consumption with every show. Single-ticket sales are increasing, and staff credited digital efforts in helping drive those sales. When the theatre shifted to an online format for its *Backstage* magazine, staff expected some resistance from patrons. However, Weitz said that only 20 out of 16,000 recipients objected to having content delivered digitally.

How Steppenwolf measures the success of its digital efforts has changed over time. Initially, the theatre mainly prioritized creating substantive dialogue through likes, posts and shares on social media. However, the emphasis has shifted to include observing growth in acquisitions and revenue. For example, the theatre measures the success of email initiatives by the size of the list, the ability to capture leads, whether people do what an email prompted them to do (watch a video, buy a ticket, etc.) and the number of assists generated (inbox reminders that pull data from emails to prompt interaction with contacts). Another important measure will eventually be the increase in ticket purchases through the website. To help spur purchases, staff said they were reexamining purchase funnels and re-situating social media from the beginning of the process to the end.

Steppenwolf used feedback from audience members, including regular surveys, to gauge engagement preferences. This has extended the dialogue with audiences, said Weitz, and has given the theatre greater capacity to reach individual market segments. Steppenwolf also conducted regular usability testing of website functions in order to remain patron-centered.

Gordon reported that regarding Now Is the Time, Steppenwolf was not specific at all about metrics or outcomes. This was in part because staff did not seek traditional funding for this program, not wanting to create a situation that was overly assessed or rigidly shaped by artificial, projected outcomes. However, interviewees did cite several indicators of success for teen outreach:

- **Steppenwolf toured *How Long Will I Cry* to new communities.**
- **All community performances sold out.**
- **More than 200 new community members engaged in on-site dialogue with Steppenwolf.**
- **There was some crossover of audience into other Steppenwolf performances.**
- **The program website aggregated more than 130 events and youth-created media.**

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REPLICATION OPPORTUNITIES

Having built a codified approach to facilitating postshow conversations, Steppenwolf now does them after every show.

Steppenwolf and its partners struggled with how to replicate Now Is the Time. The only existing infrastructure was the passion to have the conversation and the relationships the project fostered. Steppenwolf began conversations with other organizations that want to keep the project alive, but staff said it won't be "owned" by Steppenwolf. At the same time, Steppenwolf did not want to lose the traction it has gained and is working to identify a replicable model for neighborhood touring based on the experience of touring *How Long Will I Cry*.

LESSONS LEARNED: BENEFITS TO THE FIELD

Regarding postshow discussions, Carter offered specific guidance for other companies, highlighting the importance of involving the theatre's staff. "They have wide interests and skills, and the engagement and ownership of the staff is enhanced by letting them participate at a level of thought in the organization," he said. Both Lavey and Carter cautioned against leading the audience by setting explicit expectations of the conversation. They said that good organization, careful oversight and constant monitoring and feedback are also critical.

The big caveat around digital programming, Weitz cautioned, is that there will always be more options than any organization could ever pursue. "If you're not careful," he said, "it will be Pandora's box. Digital gives you just enough rope to hang yourself, and if you're not careful, you'll drown." The hardest thing, he added, is choosing what digital paths to follow based on what is appropriate for the organization. A second important lesson is that getting deeply into digital activity changes an organization and requires a fundamental rethinking of content, transparency and the organization's relationship to audiences.

Gordon cited two important lessons from her experience with Now Is the Time. First, it is difficult to partner with organizations that are either much larger or much smaller than yours, because expectations can be different. It is critically important to define relationships and responsibilities up front. "That seems obvious," she said, "but I hadn't really thought about it before." Second, Gordon emphasized the importance of grounding ambitious engagement projects in strong programming. "It's not enough," she said, "to simply say, 'Hey, let's have a conversation.'"

ORGANIZATIONAL COMMITMENT

Lavey and Executive Director David Hawkanson provided energy and drive overall for the engagement strategies, but implementation was shared across departments. Staff focused their attention on finding ways to interact with audiences around artistic work under the umbrella of the "Public Square" concept, which encourages creating cross-departmental conversation around engagement and creating a learning network of peers who can bring good ideas to the table. Gordon's efforts in overseeing the Steppenwolf for Young Adults programs, including her ability to build external partnerships, has been a model for the larger organization in this area. A special board committee comprised of trustees, educators, subscribers, foundation leaders, members of the tourism industry and others has offered strong support and has helped identify potentially fruitful engagement activities.

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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 STEPPENWOLF THEATRE COMPANY

MISSION: Steppenwolf Theatre Company is where great acting meets big ideas. Our passion is to tell stories about how we live now. Our mission is to engage audiences in an exchange of ideas that makes us think harder, laugh longer, feel more.

The Steppenwolf ensemble first began performing in the mid-1970s in the basement of a Highland Park church, the ambitious brainchild of Jeff Perry, Terry Kinney and Gary Sinise. Today, Steppenwolf has an annual budget of $15 million, and the ensemble has grown to 44 members, including actors, writers and directors. Steppenwolf remains an artist-driven theatre whose vitality is defined by its sharp appetite for groundbreaking, innovative work. Artistic programming at Steppenwolf includes a five-play Subscription Season, a two-play Steppenwolf for Young Adults season and two repertory series: First Look Repertory of New Work and Garage Rep. Steppenwolf is also devoted to training, and the School at Steppenwolf offers a 10-week residency for experienced actors who want to learn more about the ensemble traditions, values and methods that make Steppenwolf unique.

Steppenwolf for Young Adults builds on the Steppenwolf legacy by sharing the principles of ensemble collaboration, superior acting and the creation of new work with the wider community in which we live. Steppenwolf for Young Adults productions and programs are specifically geared to teachers, young adults and families. Steppenwolf for Young Adults presents professional productions of established plays, original adaptations of novels and new works for teenage audiences.

Steppenwolf holds postshow discussions after each performance and offers a wide range of digital programming designed to connect audiences to the theatre's artistic work.
www.steppenwolf.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

Steppenwolf instituted postshow discussions with audience following every performance, led by members of artistic staff.

GOALS

1. Continue dialogue around the ideas/themes in our plays.

2. Increase appetite for a variety of work.

3. Present Steppenwolf as an active and vital public square.

4. Strengthen relationships between audiences and staff.

STRATEGIES

1. Use different leaders for discussions to monitor differences in exchange, e.g., actors from the show, staff members, ensemble members, members of production.

2. Experiment with preshow discussions.

3. Vary length of discussion.

4. Use community experts (specializing in areas/themes covered by the plays).

5. Vary location.

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PROJECT 2

A major effort at Steppenwolf was to develop multiple streams of digital programming on the theatre's website, e.g., video interviews and trailers, podcasts of postshow discussions, social media links, etc.

GOALS

1. Integrate video content into all campaigns/distribution.

2. Deepen the online audience experience.

3. Present Steppenwolf as an active and vital public square.

4. Upgrade the quality and expand the quantity of digital content production.

STRATEGIES

1. Develop templates for Steppenwolf trailers, artist profiles and audience reaction videos.

2. Refine email strategy and redesign email templates.

3. Improve the quality of Steppenwolf's video content.

4. Develop postshow podcasts.

5. Refocus social media content on community building.

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PROJECT 3

Steppenwolf also expanded programs for teens, focusing annually on specific issues such as youth gun violence, LGBT bullying, etc.

GOALS

1. Reach communities we have not accessed before.

2. Create Youth Council.

3. Create show-based workshops around Now Is the Time on-site at schools around the city.

4. Build stronger online presence of digital content production.

STRATEGIES

1. Create a theme project where multiple organizations participate.

2. Align each organization's programming through lens of the theme (such as youth violence).

3. Reach diverse audiences via a tour of the show directly into the targeted communities.

4. Use digital media technology with assistance of mentors in order to help youth create digital responses and to participate in the dialogue.

5. Create a digital toolkit for other partners interested in joining.

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