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Building Arts Audiences



BUILDING DEEPER RELATIONSHIPS

**HOW STEPPENWOLF THEATRE COMPANY
IS TURNING SINGLE-TICKET BUYERS
INTO REPEAT VISITORS**

by Bob Harlow, Thomas Alfieri, Aaron Dalton, and Anne Field

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BUILDING DEEPER RELATIONSHIPS

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface	vii
Summary	1
The Subscriber Model Loses Steam	5
Tapping into Single-Ticket Buyers	9
Deepening the Audience Relationship	14
The Engagement Strategy	16
1. Listening to the Audience Every Night	16
2. Extending the Conversation beyond the Theater Space	18
3. Online Content Example—Beckett’s <i>Endgame</i>	24
4. Extending the Relationship through Events	26
5. Cultivating a Sophisticated Audience	28
6. Treating Non-Subscribers and Subscribers Equally Well	30
Results	33
1. Ticket Sales: Single-Ticket Buyers Become Repeat Visitors	33
2. Post-Show Discussions Attended by a Minority of the Audience	36
3. Online Content Access Grows Steadily	37
4. The Artistic Mission Is Strengthened	40
Results Drivers	43
1. Using Audience Research as a Decision-Making Tool	43
2. Understanding What Audiences Are Seeking	44
3. Creating a Broader Experience to Build Stronger Relationships	46

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4. Aligning the Organization around the “Public Square”	
Vision and Strategy	47
5. Encouraging Cross-Functional Collaboration	50
Going Forward: Will a Sustainable Relationship	
Lead to Contributions?	55
Questions to Consider	57

TABLES AND FIGURES

<i>Table 1. Steppenwolf Non-Subscribers Buying Tickets to Multiple Performances</i>	34
<i>Table 2. Attendance at Post-Show Discussions</i>	36
<i>Table 3. Steppenwolf.org Website Visits</i>	38
<i>Table 4. Steppenwolf Content on External Social Media Sites</i>	40
<i>Figure 1. Information about Steppenwolf Online Content Appearing in the Program for the Steppenwolf 2009–2010 Production of Fake</i>	22, Colorplate 1

PREFACE

This case study describes how Steppenwolf Theatre Company is building a deeper relationship with its audience by developing an ongoing conversation about the work on stage. It is part of a larger set of four case studies, commissioned by The Wallace Foundation, of arts organizations’ efforts to reach new audiences and deepen relationships with current audiences.

These studies come at a time of particular urgency. According to the National Endowment for the Arts’ *2008 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts*, American adults’ participation in key activities such as attending live performances and visiting museums is at its lowest levels since the survey began tracking it in 1982.¹ At the same time, the arts audience has grown older than the general population. The message is clear: Arts organizations need to attract and engage new audiences to ensure their artistic and financial viability.

Yet the work of these four organizations and the case study investigations describing them was undertaken not with a view that actual *interest* in the arts is waning, but with a hope, shared by many, that we are witnessing a dynamic shift in participation, both in amount and in form. Much evidence suggests that Americans are longing to take part in the arts but want to do so beyond how we have come to define (or measure) participation.²

1. National Endowment for the Arts, *2008 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts* (Washington, D.C.: National Endowment for the Arts, 2009), 2–3.

2. Steven J. Tepper and Yang Gao, “Engaging Art: What Counts?,” in *Engaging Art: The Next Great Transformation of America’s Cultural Life*, eds. Steven J. Tepper and Bill Ivey (New York: Routledge, 2008), 17–47.

Twenty-first-century Americans may be looking for a more interactive or participatory experience, for example.³ In response, inventive organizations are trying to share their art in ways that help their mission and resources dovetail with the preferences and lifestyles of potential audiences.

The cases describe and evaluate newly launched or expanded participation-building programs designed and implemented by four organizations involved in different artistic disciplines: the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Steppenwolf Theatre Company, the San Francisco Girls Chorus, and Boston Lyric Opera. They lay out how these efforts were created and run and also identify strategic and tactical elements driving results. In the process, we explore such questions as: What program and organizational factors produce success? What are the costs, benefits, and trade-offs associated with building participation? What is the broader impact on arts organizations that undertake it?

Each case study in the series includes background information on each organization and the events that led to its participation-building program. The case studies begin with a brief synopsis, much like an abstract, and a “scene-setter” describing an actual component of that program. A section summarizing the specific participation-building challenges faced by the organization and the program it built to address them follows. Then we include more detail about strategy, tactics, and key decisions made as the organization developed its approach. We detail both how program outcomes were measured and their results, and provide an evaluative analysis of those results, highlighting the key drivers behind them. Finally, we pose central questions for arts organizations to consider if they’re facing similar audience

3. See, for example, Henry Jenkins and Vanessa Bertozzi, “Artistic Expression in the Age of Participatory Culture: How and Why Young People Create,” in *Engaging Art: The Next Great Transformation of America’s Cultural Life*, eds. Steven J. Tepper and Bill Ivey (New York: Routledge, 2008), 171–195.

challenges or weighing the possibility of implementing programs like those described in the case study.

The case studies are the product of multiple interviews with key staff and an analysis of program elements, budgets, and planning documents, as well as qualitative and quantitative research undertaken by independent consultants and the organizations themselves to inform and evaluate their own efforts. We also examined a wide variety of indicators, such as ticket purchase, online activity, and participation in a broad array of programming.

Ultimately, there are limits to the general conclusions we can draw from the case studies: These were not scientifically controlled experiments. And each of the four organizations studied designed a different program aimed at a different target audience. Nonetheless, we can discern some general principles that other arts organizations can learn from and adopt.

1. Market research can sharpen engagement-strategy development and execution. Organizations that want to engage new audiences or deepen existing relationships need to understand what audiences are looking for. Many of the organizations profited by using market research to identify more precisely how current and potential audiences think about their organizations, how they think about the kind of art they provide, and the experience those audiences are seeking. For some professionals, especially artistic and programming staff, soliciting audience opinion runs the risk of overtly pandering to public taste, thereby sacrificing artistic integrity (sometimes referred to as “dumbing down”). But listening to participants can provide observations needed to create innovative, creative, and deeply engaging programs—insights that, for these organizations, sometimes revealed an unexpected level of sophistication among audience members as

well. Artistic staff at Steppenwolf and the San Francisco Girls Chorus even found that audiences welcomed bolder artistic choices; the artistic mission was fortified.

The case studies suggest that rigorous research, even though it may not yet be the norm in arts organizations, is crucial to understanding audiences and evaluating progress. It isn't enough, for example, to make assumptions based on ticket sales. Listening to audiences means conducting well-constructed research to pinpoint what they're looking for from your art form and your organization. It requires doing both quantitative and qualitative studies to inform strategy, evaluate results, and make course corrections on the road to meeting participation-building objectives. In uncertain economic times, when every dollar counts, such research is especially important to ensure that participation-building programs are structured correctly and are on track.

2. Audiences are open to engaging the arts in new and different ways. All of the organizations were successful when they provided new avenues for audiences to find a “way in” to their art. For example:

- Creating unique social gatherings that encourage discussions around the art collection, as at *Gardner After Hours*
- Facilitating critical thinking and dialogue about theater, as Steppenwolf has done on its website and in post-show discussions
- Providing interactive and educational programs to introduce new audiences to the arts, like the Boston Lyric Opera's preview program, which gives children (and many adults) a first-time glimpse into the workings of opera in a familiar and comfortable setting
- Using visual communications to telegraph an unexpected

level of professionalism and artistic sophistication, as the San Francisco Girls Chorus has done in its carefully designed marketing communications makeover

3. Participation-building is ongoing, not a one-time initiative. Cultivating audiences is an effort that can never be viewed as finished. The organizations studied continue to fine-tune their programs, and even alter program objectives as they learn more about their audiences or as the relationships with audiences change. After making strides toward creating a dialogue with existing audience members, Steppenwolf Theatre Company is opening the conversation to an even wider spectrum of new theatergoers; the Gardner Museum continues to examine and revise a program that has exceeded its expectations; the San Francisco Girls Chorus is investigating how it can encourage repeat visits from the new audience of classical music patrons it has attracted; Boston Lyric Opera is reviewing matters related to performance location and strategic partnerships as critical determinants of programs to bring opera to young people.

4. Audience-building efforts should be fully integrated into every element of an organization, not a separate initiative or program. That means they can't be run by just one or two departments or as add-on initiatives unrelated to the overall mission. When participation-building objectives are embraced by the entire organization and conceptualized and implemented as an outgrowth of the overall mission, staff can have clarity of purpose and visitors an “authentic” or deeply felt experience, and the institution's goals can be most fully realized.

5. Mission is critical. Programs that emerge from an organization's mission, when that mission is clear and supported throughout the organization, develop in an environment in which they can thrive. At the same time, these programs

are better able to provide the rich experiences audiences are looking for, because they draw on and offer to the public those things about which organizations care most.⁴ The Gardner Museum and Steppenwolf Theatre Company in particular built rich programs around their unique missions and philosophies about experiencing art. As a result, their programs have connected audiences more deeply with their art, and have attracted new audiences in large numbers.

Finally, we hope these case studies inspire. These programs demonstrate what is possible with strategic thinking and solid implementation. They prove that arts organizations don't have to be victims of a trend, but instead can be masters of their destinies, contributing to a vigorous, thriving, and viable artistic community.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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We offer our sincere thanks to the staffs and boards of the

4. B. Joseph Pine II and James H. Gilmore, "Museums and Authenticity," *Museum News* 86 (2007): 76-80, <http://www.aam-us.org/pubs/mn/authenticity.cfm>. Pine and Gilmore suggest that in a world of increasing competition for leisure time, people are looking for strong experiences. They suggest that arts organizations can render such strong experiences if they stay true to themselves and express a strong identity outward.

four organizations we studied. Their candor will, we trust, pay important dividends in the form of additional knowledge about what works and what does not in engaging audiences. We were fortunate to have liaisons at each of the four organizations who helped us work through the details and dedicated much of their own time to ensuring that the case studies were as informative as possible. These include Peggy Burchenal and Julie Crites at the Gardner Museum, Melanie Smith and Polly Springhorn of the San Francisco Girls Chorus, Judith McMichael and Julie House of Boston Lyric Opera, and Linda Garrison of Steppenwolf Theatre Company. As we sought to formulate the key questions and identify critical learnings from the cases, we were also fortunate to have extensive feedback on strategic direction and conclusions from several leading arts practitioners, including Jim Hirsch of the Chicago Sinfonietta, Molly Smith of Arena Stage, Kelly Tweeddale of Seattle Opera, Laura Sweet of the Ordway Center for the Performing Arts, Bonnie Pitman of the Dallas Museum of Art, and Stephanie Hughley of the New Jersey Performing Arts Center. Finally, Sandra Radoff and Mari Henninger provided important technical assistance as we examined the data the organizations collected. Of course, the final responsibility for the questions posed and conclusions drawn rests with us.

Bob Harlow

SUMMARY

Performing arts organizations across the country are grappling with falling subscription renewal rates and a troubling decline in total subscriber numbers. This trend has serious implications for many organizations that depend on subscribers not just for ticket revenue, but also for a large share of contributed income.

Chicago-based Steppenwolf Theatre Company has approached this problem by trying to develop deeper relationships with both subscribers and non-subscribers. It has launched a concerted effort to help all ticket buyers feel a greater sense of belonging to the organization, regardless of whether or not they are season subscribers. In the process, many audience members who used to purchase tickets to just one performance per season now purchase tickets to two, three, or more.

To build this deeper relationship with its audience, Steppenwolf has launched an ongoing dialogue around the process of creating theater. Audience members take part in nightly post-show discussions, attend special thematic events, and enjoy a rich selection of online content—including multiple videos, podcasts, blogs, articles, and slide shows—in which the artists discuss their work from multiple perspectives.

Steppenwolf seems to have succeeded in its goal of attracting more non-subscribers to multiple performances. During the two-year period under review, the number of non-subscribers

who purchased tickets to more than one performance grew by more than 61 percent, to 2,281 households. At the same time, the relationship-deepening initiatives seem to have had the added benefit of supporting high subscriber renewal rates. These rates have remained in the 80 percent range, well above the national average of 73 percent. Over the long term, Steppenwolf hopes that its non-subscribers who purchase tickets to multiple performances will support the theater much in the way subscribers traditionally have.

The show was over. Steppenwolf Theatre Company had just completed one of its nightly performances of *Endgame*, an absurdist one-act play by Samuel Beckett in which one character cannot stand, one cannot sit, and the other two live in trash cans.

The house lights came up and most of the audience filed out of the theater, heading for home or perhaps stopping for a nightcap at one of the nearby restaurants and bars in the surrounding Lincoln Park neighborhood of Chicago.

But dozens of audience members stayed in their seats. They were not waiting for an encore, but rather for the start of the usual post-show discussion that follows each Steppenwolf performance.

An assistant director stepped onto the stage in the role of moderator to facilitate the discussion. Before asking the audience for questions, he reassured participants that they should not worry about having the “right” or “wrong” opinion on such an abstruse production. “Having sat through the seventy-five minutes of the play qualifies you to have the right answer!” he announced to laughter.

Then the questions began. One man admitted that he had struggled to engage with the play and wondered if the actors also had trouble connecting with the work. Rather than answer the question directly, the moderator carefully turned the question back to the audience, asking, “Did you have problems engaging with the play?” Some audience members agreed that the work left them cold, but others had found a way to connect with the subject matter.

Another audience member asked, “Why didn’t you use music?”

Again, the moderator reflected the question back to the audience: “Did any of you notice a lack of music?” Discussion ensued among audience members on whether musical accompaniment would have enhanced or detracted from the experience.

Rather than offering explanations, Steppenwolf discussion moderators typically emphasize the interpretive element of the theatrical experience. They ask the audience which images and lines they found most memorable. The moderators prompt the audience to look for connections between the characters and the situations in the play and events in their own real lives.

This special access to the artistic inner circle is not limited to subscribers or high-level donors. Audience members are welcome to participate regardless of whether they are longtime buyers of season tickets to Steppenwolf or newcomers who have bought a sole ticket for this particular performance.

When the discussion ends, more often than not audience members who were previously befuddled by the work on stage now realize that they hold the power to make meaning out of an apparently inaccessible work of art. As the audience finally leaves the theater, they depart not as passive observers, but as active and engaged participants who have shared in a communal search for meaning.

THE SUBSCRIBER MODEL LOSES STEAM

For decades, many regional theaters have relied on a subscriber base to provide a predictable income stream. Instead of buying single tickets, subscribers buy tickets to a theater’s entire season, often for a reduced price. These same subscribers can renew their subscription year after year, entering into relationships with theaters that can span decades. This subscription model is largely credited to Danny Newman, who developed it for the Lyric Opera of Chicago in the 1950s and began working broadly with theaters in the early 1960s. Newman later promoted the development of the subscription-based theater attendance and revenue model in his book, *Subscribe Now*,⁵ which became required reading for theater marketers.

The subscription model delivers not only a predictable income stream, but also provides marketing efficiencies. Instead of selling each show individually, theaters can sell entire seasons of multiple shows as a package. As a result, the marketing cost per ticket sold in a subscription is less than that for a single show. Throughout the mid- to late-twentieth century, long-term subscribers became long-term supporters, providing theaters with both steady ticket income and crucial contributed income. Not surprisingly, the subscription model became the dominant funding model for regional theater companies and other performing arts organizations.

Recent studies have revealed what many U.S. arts orga-

5. Danny Newman, *Subscribe Now: Building Arts Audiences Through Dynamic Subscription Promotion* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1977).

nizations already know—subscribers are declining. Audience members cite lifestyle reasons in explaining their reluctance to subscribe. They say that their schedules are no longer predictable or flexible enough to accommodate season subscriptions. As a result, many former subscribers state that they now prefer to purchase tickets for performances one at a time (and are commonly referred to as “single-ticket buyers”).⁶

These qualitative observations are supported by hard numbers that show a nationwide downward trend in theater subscriptions. In 2009, Theatre Communications Group (TCG) documented a 14% drop in the number of regional theater subscribers between 2005 and 2009. During the same time period, subscription revenue adjusted for inflation declined by 8.5%.⁷ Both statistics represent a continuing trend that cannot be attributed solely to the deep 2007–2009 U.S. recession and ensuing financial crisis.

These and other figures have triggered alarms at performing arts organizations, particularly at the opera companies, symphonies, dance companies, and regional theater groups that have traditionally relied on subscribers for a significant percentage of their earned income.

Fortunately the news from the TCG study is not completely grim. The report (p. 6) also showed that single-ticket sales revenue adjusted for inflation increased by 6.2% from 2005–2009. With subscriber numbers falling and single-ticket sales rising, nearly two-thirds of theaters (65%) reported earning more single-ticket

6. Audience members who purchase tickets to single performances are referred to as “single-ticket buyers,” although they may purchase more than one ticket for a given performance; the term “single-ticket buyer” is used to differentiate them from subscribers who purchase tickets for the whole season.

7. Zannie Giraud Voss, Glenn B. Voss, Christopher Shuff, and Ilana B. Rose, “Theatre facts 2009” (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2009), published online at http://www.tcg.org/pdfs/tools/TheatreFacts_2009.pdf, 6, 18.

STEPPENWOLF THEATRE COMPANY AT A GLANCE

- 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.
- Founded in 1976 by a collective of actors
- Current ensemble includes forty-three artists, including actors, directors, playwrights, and filmmakers
- Typically produces over 630 performances of more than a dozen plays each year
- Strong reputation for producing challenging, thought-provoking, and award-winning work
- Artistic Director: Martha Lavey
- Executive Director: David Hawkanson
- Director of Marketing and Communications: Linda Garrison
- Artistic Consultant: Polly Carl
- Total audience: 200,000 annually (2010–2011 season)
- Operating budget: \$13.5 million (2010–2011 season)

income than subscriber income in 2008.⁸

So can performing arts organizations heave a sigh of relief at the prospect of replacing lost subscriber income with new single-ticket income? Yes, but with some big caveats. Not surprisingly, attracting single-ticket buyers to the theater is a much more expensive proposition than getting loyal subscribers to renew their subscriptions. How much more? The 2009 TCG study

8. Zannie Giraud Voss, Glenn B. Voss, Christopher Shuff, and Ilana B. Rose, “Theatre facts 2008” (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2008), published online at http://www.tcg.org/pdfs/tools/TheatreFacts_2008.pdf, 5.

showed that marketing costs for generating a given amount of single-ticket revenue are much higher than for producing subscriber income; the theaters profiled spent twenty-three cents to produce every dollar of single-ticket income but only thirteen cents for every subscription dollar earned.⁹

Not only is it expensive from a marketing standpoint to get single-ticket buyers to the theater in the first place, but studies in other performing arts suggest that most first-time single-ticket buyers do not return. After investing heavily in getting the single-ticket buyer to the performance, it can be dispiriting for an arts organization to think that the revenue from that investment may consist of only the price of a single ticket if the buyer does not return.¹⁰

9. Voss et al. (2009), 25, 26.

10. Oliver Wyman, "Turning First-Timers into Life-Timers: Addressing the True Drivers of Churn," http://www.oliverwyman.com/ow/pdf_files/OW_EN_PUBL_2008_AUDIENCGROWTHINITIATIVE.pdf, 7.

TAPPING INTO SINGLE-TICKET BUYERS

As the subscription model loses steam, theaters will need to think about different ways of building a reliable audience base of single-ticket buyers who don't require the usual single-ticket levels of marketing investment. Steppenwolf Theatre Company in Chicago has launched a major initiative to build long-term relationships with single-ticket buyers with the goal of bringing these non-subscribers back to the theater for multiple performances.

Steppenwolf has an enviable reputation as one of the top regional theater companies in the country. The company has been honored with both a Tony Award for regional theater excellence and the National Medal of Arts in recognition of its artistic accomplishments.

Even with such acclaim, Steppenwolf finds itself under the same types of pressures facing other theaters and arts organizations. The company has traditionally depended on subscribers not just for ticket revenue, but also for contributed income.

Thanks perhaps to the strong quality of its work or the passion for theater in its home market of Chicago, Steppenwolf has enjoyed a relatively high subscription renewal rate of 80% vs. the industry average of 73%.¹¹ Nevertheless, Steppenwolf has not been able to attract enough new subscribers to compensate for attrition in its subscriber base. The company recognizes that continuing its financial dependence on the traditional subscriber model would limit its growth prospects.

11. Voss et al. (2009), 18.

With the goal of understanding perceptions about Steppenwolf and identifying both drivers of commitment and areas important to deepening the relationship between the audience and the theater, Steppenwolf conducted focus groups with subscribers (loyal subscribers of over three years, as well as first-year subscribers) and single-ticket buyers. Given the typically innovative and provocative nature of Steppenwolf’s productions, the organization was not surprised to hear that both subscribers and non-subscribing single-ticket buyers in its audience were equally likely to identify themselves as lifelong learners who went to the theater specifically to be challenged. The audience comes to Steppenwolf with the hope—and the expectation—that the company will present adventuresome and challenging work.

Steppenwolf defines “lifelong learners” as people who feel an obligation to find out what is going on in the world and ponder new ideas. These lifelong learners like to be pushed out of their intellectual comfort zone as part of an educational experience, and they see Steppenwolf as providing opportunities to see edgy, memorable work. They want to connect with Steppenwolf plays on both an emotional and intellectual level, and they want the plays to stimulate both introspection and debate. Steppenwolf had always had this kind of dialogue and intellectual debate about its work inside its own walls among its artists. Steppenwolf’s leaders now saw an opportunity to extend that dialogue to the audience and thereby build deeper relationships with non-subscribers and subscribers alike.

As a complement to the focus group research, Steppenwolf conducted a data mining analysis of its database of subscriber and single-ticket buyer households, in part to understand what demographic variables distinguished Steppenwolf audiences from the population at large. They were “pleasantly surprised” to find that their audience was not distinguished so much by

typical demographic qualifiers of theater audiences (income, age, etc.) as by variables that suggest a proclivity for lifelong learning—namely higher education levels than those of the Chicago population at large.

The focus groups provided some other encouraging findings. It turned out that single-ticket buyers—even those who saw only one or two Steppenwolf productions per year—felt the same affinity and loyalty toward Steppenwolf that subscribers did. In explaining their decision to subscribe, subscribers cited factors unrelated to artistic tastes and preferences, such as believing that their commitment would compel them to remain active theatergoers. The research did not reveal any differences in artistic tastes or preferences between subscribers and non-subscribers.

**SINGLE-TICKET BUYERS—
EVEN THOSE WHO SAW ONLY ONE OR
TWO PRODUCTIONS PER YEAR—
FELT THE SAME AFFINITY AND LOYALTY
AS STEPPENWOLF SUBSCRIBERS.**

For Steppenwolf, this discovery of the depth of loyalty and affinity among single-ticket buyers proved to be an eye-opening insight. “We had assumed that differences in purchase behavior (subscription vs. single ticket) would spring from differences in perceptions and attitudes about the theater. We were mistaken and learned something more significant,” says Linda Garrison, Steppenwolf’s director of marketing and communications. “The finding prompted us to ask ourselves why we were treating non-subscribers like second-class citizens. It encouraged us to look for ways to develop a different relationship with these single-ticket buyers. We recognized that the real capacity for sustainability and growth in our organization lay in increasing the frequency of attendance among these non-subscribers.”

Recognizing the potential to develop deeper relationships

with both subscribers and non-subscribers in its audience of lifelong learners, Steppenwolf began thinking about ways to engage audiences in long-term, meaningful relationships that would involve them more with the theater over time. Under the direction of Artistic Director Martha Lavey, Steppenwolf began to seek ways to transcend the traditional transactional relationship based on buying and selling tickets in favor of building an ongoing dialogue with its audience about the creative process. As Lavey says:

*People come to Steppenwolf for a sense of community. ... The consumer transaction produces a buyer who walks away, satisfied or not. What Steppenwolf has the power to produce is a circle of ideas, passions, and artistry, into which one can walk and in which one can participate.*¹²

Steppenwolf would continue to produce plays, but the audience experience would extend beyond the performance, with new opportunities to explore ideas before and after the performance. Steppenwolf wanted to make these opportunities available for each production, so that over time, audience members would enter into an ongoing dialogue with the company. Steppenwolf dedicated a three-year Excellence Award grant from The Wallace Foundation along with other funds to developing and implementing strategies to do so.

By moving away from transactional relationships with single-ticket buyers and toward deeper emotional relationships, Steppenwolf hoped to reap important financial benefits. As mentioned earlier in reference to the TCG study, theater companies typically must spend far more on marketing to single-ticket buy-

12. Ben Cameron, "Theatre Communications Group field letter, June 15, 2006," http://www.tcg.org/publications/fieldletter/july06_fieldletter.cfm.

ers in order to generate the same amount of revenue as they would for subscribers. If Steppenwolf could find a way to deepen its relationship with non-subscribers, it might be able to achieve subscriber-caliber ticket sales without spending quite so much on marketing costs. "The big thing was to get out of the transactional relationship," says Executive Director David Hawkanson. "So we started putting more emphasis on the total experience."

Although the impetus may have been financial—to increase frequency of attendance among audience members who currently attend only one or two Steppenwolf productions per year—Steppenwolf sees the total experience that it hopes to deliver as a reflection of core values that have defined Steppenwolf from its beginnings. According to Martha Lavey, these core values include:

- Ensemble, the basis of Steppenwolf's artistic life, history, and constitution
- Innovation, the idea of building a new kind of theater where artists (not administrators) drive decision making and the organization prioritizes the cultivation of new voices and new artists
- Citizenship, a sense of responsibility to the theatrical and cultural community

The development of an ongoing dialogue with the audience constitutes an evolution in how these values are brought to life. As Lavey explains:

Steppenwolf began as a conversation among artists. ... The ensemble members envisioned their role as speaking from a platform to an audience. There has been an evolution over the past number of years [to] where it now feels like a conversation with a community, where our role is the activation of a public discourse.

DEEPENING THE AUDIENCE RELATIONSHIP

To build that discourse, Steppenwolf has found ways to help audience members explore the meaning and their experience of the work on stage with Steppenwolf artists and other audience members. The engagement strategy is designed to resonate with lifelong learners' desire to explore ideas and connect them to their own lives. Lavey explained the goal of the relationship they were looking to build:

We see our work at Steppenwolf to be the creation of a multi-layered conversation with our audiences. ... Our audiences come to the theater to watch characters engage in a conversation. The hope, in their doing so, is that we engage them in a conversation with the work. We ask them to negotiate the meaning of what they have seen by talking about it—among themselves and with us.¹³

As Steppenwolf has worked to deepen the relationship with its audience, the organization has coalesced around the metaphor of a "Public Square." Steppenwolf sees itself as a place where people can come together and be spurred by a theatrical experience to engage in both an external discussion and an internal exploration of meaning. In practice, the Public Square promotes dialogue among the theater and its audience members—Steppenwolf shares ideas with the audience, and audience members

13. Ibid.

share ideas back both with Steppenwolf and with one another.

The participants in the Public Square all have certain roles to play. Lavey believes that Steppenwolf has the responsibility to set the stage for the conversation by determining which works to produce and telling stories in a fine, nuanced way. Artistic Consultant (and former Steppenwolf Director of Artistic Development) Polly Carl draws a clear line between Steppenwolf's dialogue with its audience and the suggestion that theaters should allow audiences to actually choose which plays the theater will perform, or even that theaters should make programming choices based predominantly on what they think will have box-office appeal. "We have to take ownership of what is ours and what is the audience's," explains Carl. "We have to trust ourselves as artistic leaders and then create conditions under which we can talk to our audiences about the art we create."

THE ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY

1. LISTENING TO THE AUDIENCE EVERY NIGHT

Perhaps the most concrete manifestation of Steppenwolf's commitment to a dialogue with its audience can be found in the post-show discussions that Steppenwolf hosts following each performance. After the curtain falls, the audience is invited to stay and participate in a discussion of the performance moderated by a non-acting member of the artistic staff who seeks to elicit reactions to the play.

Post-show discussions are neither new nor revolutionary, but Steppenwolf differentiates itself from other theaters both through its goals and the guidelines of its post-show conversations. Understanding the motives of the lifelong learners in their audience has led Steppenwolf to structure the discussion in a way that facilitates exploration of ideas and finding meaning, as opposed to offering audiences an interpretation of what they have just seen or an "ask the artist" session. As Martha Lavey puts it, the objective is to have the audience think collectively about what they have just seen and come to their own conclusions about the material in the same way that the Steppenwolf artists themselves do. To achieve these objectives, Steppenwolf has implemented some guidelines to govern the discussions:

1) Post-show discussions run after every performance. Audiences thereby always have a chance to discuss the work. The regularity of post-show discussions signifies that they are not a special event, but rather an integral part of the Steppenwolf experience.

2) Discussion leaders present themselves as dialogue facilitators rather than experts. Their goal is to keep the dialogue focused on the audience's reaction to what they have just seen. The discussion moderators typically refrain from providing any background or context to the work, preferring to let the audience's own experiences form the context for the discussion. "It's very important for us that the person on stage is *not* seen as an expert who is there to teach the audience about the play," says Lavey. "When someone asks a question, we turn it back out and ask other audience members what they think. [In this context] the audience members are the experts; we're not."

3) The discussions are not led by an actor, but rather by members of the artistic and production staff or visitors from local universities who are coached in ways to facilitate audience dialogue. This choice of moderator helps ensure that the discussion stays focused on themes and ideas prompted by the performance as opposed to logistical trivia such as "How heavy is that costume?" Although many of Steppenwolf's ensemble members are local or national celebrities, the organization made a conscious decision *not* to leverage that celebrity in order to keep the post-show discussions focused on the performance itself rather than the performers.

Steppenwolf discovered the power of this particular type of post-show discussion to produce an exchange and exploration of ideas in the audience a few seasons ago. Worried that audiences might be disturbed by the controversial themes in its 2005 production of Bruce Norris's play *The Pain and the Itch*, Steppenwolf set up post-show discussions to give audiences a chance to voice any concerns they might have. But something unexpected happened—the post-show discussions ended up concentrating on dramatic themes and elements rather than the more obviously controversial elements of the play. The controversial elements took a backseat to extending and deepening the theatrical experience.

rience, and the need to neutralize those controversial elements dissipated. The discussions on *The Pain and the Itch* gave Steppenwolf a template for making post-show discussions a regular feature of the Steppenwolf experience, thereby helping audiences connect their own experiences with the work on stage and providing an opportunity to strengthen the relationship between audience members and the organization.

2. EXTENDING THE CONVERSATION BEYOND THE THEATER SPACE

Steppenwolf recognizes that not every single-ticket buyer or subscriber will stay after the show to participate in a discussion. As detailed later in the Results section, on a typical night, approximately forty to fifty audience members (between 12% and 16% of the audience) stay for the post-show discussions. To reach the rest of the audience, Steppenwolf uses other media and communications strategies to engage subscribers and non-subscribers alike in an unending dialogue. “We learned from the focus groups that our audiences like to take in content in a variety of ways,” says Garrison. “Some like to listen, some like visual presentation, some prefer the printed word. To engage the broadest swath of audience, content has to be made available across a range of platforms.”

Steppenwolf has dedicated large sections of its website (<http://steppenwolf.org>) to building this dialogue and deepening the relationship with its audience. Hawkanson explains that Steppenwolf’s goal is “to keep putting content in front of them that might stimulate their interest in doing something more and increasing their frequency with us.”

Either before or after a performance, audience members can engage online with Steppenwolf by visiting the “Explore” section of the website to access interviews, articles, podcasts,

and videos for each production. All of this material is frequently updated, and collected under a more comprehensive “Watch & Listen” section of the website that contains material from all Steppenwolf productions.

In creating online content, Steppenwolf has made some key decisions that reflect its understanding of its audience and its desire to build ongoing relationships with that audience. Again, with the objective of tapping into lifelong learners’ desires to explore ideas and push boundaries, Steppenwolf wanted to extend to the audience the explorations the artists themselves undertook in the process of creating theater. Rather than just showing production stills or posting links to positive reviews, they created a library of production-related discussions and explorations, including articles, video discussions, podcast essays, and interviews, around the thematic and creative issues that emerged as they produced shows for the stage. This content is available to all who visit the Steppenwolf website—subscribers, non-subscribers, and even interested Internet surfers from other cities or countries who may never even have had the opportunity to visit Chicago or attend a Steppenwolf production.

The articles, videos, and podcasts have a consistent tone in which discussion is frank, open, and unrehearsed so that audience members can grapple with the same questions that confront the artists. The issues raised in the digital content include everything from character development to author’s intent to set construction. Instead of study guides or academic essays, Steppenwolf offers online content that is intentionally open-ended and revels in the same spirit of exploration that the artists apply when searching for meaning in the work—and that lifelong learners seek when visiting the theater.

The digital content manager and staff (who report to Marketing) develop ideas for videos, podcasts, and photo galleries around one guideline—all content must feature the artists talk-

ing to the audience about the work. This direction imparts a sense of clarity and voice, helps to provide a consistent experience to repeat site visitors, and dovetails directly with what lifelong learners are looking for from Steppenwolf. Without the benefit of the knowledge gained about the audience from research, Garrison believes that Steppenwolf's website strategy and content would be less purposeful and more scattered.

The content is developed and made available in real time as productions themselves are developed. In this way, the audience member can witness the ongoing dialogue and exploration of dramatic issues and themes as it happens at Steppenwolf. The process is continuous, from the beginning of rehearsals through the full run of the production, with new content being posted continually before and during each show's run. Steppenwolf sees this continual generation of dialogue as a way of building ongoing engagement with the theater, keeping audience members interested over time even outside the physical theater space.

Although Steppenwolf now has an impressive and comprehensive multimedia website with which to foster dialogue, creating this website took time. In the spring of 2007, Steppenwolf first started posting video content to YouTube and providing links to these videos from its website. In July 2008, it brought all those videos to its own website under the Watch & Listen section while simultaneously adding podcast capabilities and reorganizing the site to make it easier to navigate. Steppenwolf then added podcasts with ensemble members, directors, and playwrights. The content available online also includes photo galleries and articles that offer a behind-the-scenes look at how Steppenwolf's ensemble members put together its productions. Steppenwolf now has one full-time staff person who is charged with managing the production of all of this content. As detailed later in the Results section, there have been nearly two million content views since the July 2008 launch.

Steppenwolf builds awareness of its online content through multiple channels. Displays in the lobby announce the availability of online content and explain how to access it. The organization directs audience members to visit its website via printed announcements in show programs (see Figure 1 and Colorplate 1) and verbal announcements in the post-show discussions. These announcements are reinforced via e-mail communications sent to subscribers and those single-ticket holders for whom Steppenwolf has e-mail address information reminding them of the upcoming performance.

In addition to production-specific content, steppenwolf.org also contains a blog in which the artistic director, ensemble members, and production and administrative staff members discuss the relevant themes, related ideas, and the process of developing the work that appears on stage. The blog adds an important interactive element to the website by allowing audience members the opportunity to participate in the conversation through their comments on blog entries.

Blogs can be challenging for any small or mid-sized organization because maintaining them with fresh, frequently updated content takes time and effort. Steppenwolf helps ensure the freshness and relevance of its blog by spreading content creation tasks for the blog among several staff members. Having several contributors keeps the blog lively because there are frequent updates from multiple perspectives and voices. The Marketing and Artistic staffs review all blog posts before publication to maintain some message discipline and ensure that the blog has a consistent Steppenwolf voice.

Overall, the online content is designed to strengthen the relationship with the audience in several ways:

- It keeps the conversation going before and after the evening in the theater.
- It gives audience members an insider's perspective of

WATCH & LISTEN

Learn more about Steppenwolf, our ensemble and our productions on the **Watch & Listen** section of steppenwolf.org. Videos, podcasts, photo galleries and articles—in addition to the Steppenwolf blog—can all be found online. Go backstage and check out what our artists find most important about their work on all three of our stages.

WATCH & LISTEN

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#029: Ensemble Member Kate Arrington on Fake
Aug. 27, 2009

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Aug. 19, 2009

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Ensemble members Alan Wilder and Kate Arrington with Larry Yando
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Watch & Listen
steppenwolf.org/watchlisten
Our website includes podcasts, videos, photo galleries and articles, all featuring our artists, ensemble members and their work all in one place.

Figure 1. Information about Steppenwolf Online Content Appearing in the Program for the Steppenwolf 2009–2010 production of Fake

Photographs by Mark Campbell. Featured artists and staff: Kate Arrington, Eric Simonson, David New, Tony Hernandez, Lauren Katz, Mierka Girten, Alan Wilder, Larry Yando, Rani Waterman, Cliff Chamberlain, Lijana Wallenda-Hernandez, Stephen Louis Grush, Amy J. Carle

grappling with the same creative and production issues as the artistic staff and the actors themselves.

- It empowers the audience members by giving them the opportunity to explore in whatever depth they wish.
- By helping audience members connect more deeply with the work, the online content advances Steppenwolf's goal of cultivating an audience of sophisticated theatergoers with greater hunger for the kind of challenging work that Steppenwolf offers.
- Finally, the artist-created and unrehearsed nature of the online content allows the personality of the Steppenwolf artists to come through. In the midst of the conversation, impromptu jokes are sometimes told, references are made to prior Steppenwolf productions, artists question themselves and sometimes laugh at themselves, much as they would in a post-show discussion with friends or artistic colleagues. Nothing appears to be rehearsed. Ideas are not watered down, but are presented in their complexity with respect for the audience's intelligence.

3. ONLINE CONTENT EXAMPLE—BECKETT'S *ENDGAME*

Steppenwolf creates extensive online content for each of the five shows that make up its season productions (Steppenwolf produces additional shows on its stages as part of other series, which do not receive this extensive level of coverage). For a recent production of Beckett's *Endgame*, Steppenwolf developed seven types of online content:

- A brief written overview of the production
- An *Artists* section listing the cast and crew, with links to their biographies
- A *Photo Gallery* with rehearsal photos, production photos, and photos from events planned around *Endgame*

- A *Video* section containing three brief scenes from the play, a video of actors and the director of *Endgame* that moves between comedy and analysis as they search for humor in the play, and a video of Artistic Director Martha Lavey describing the experience of the post-show discussion and how it helps audience members affirm their understanding of *Endgame*
- A *Podcast* section containing five podcasts, each of fifteen to twenty minutes in length, including a combination of interviews with individual *Endgame* actors about the meaning they are discovering in the work, plus a discussion by Lavey of the full season and the way *Endgame* fits into the overall seasonal theme of "belief"
- An *On the Blogs* tab with links to five posts from Steppenwolf artistic and administrative staff about *Endgame*
- An *Articles* tab featuring articles that also appear in the show program, three of which deal with themes and motifs that the play engenders, and one that places those themes within *Endgame*'s historical context

Endgame is a production whose meaning is elusive. Indeed, one could say that much of the enjoyment from seeing *Endgame* derives from considering the ideas at play and the multiple levels of meaning underlying the interaction among its characters. Steppenwolf designed much of the online content for the show to help audiences explore the ideas contained in the play from multiple angles. In this way, the company made the production more accessible not by simplifying it or offering a definitive explanation, but rather by intensifying the intellectual discourse in a way that would appeal to the lifelong learners in the audience.

In the case of a potentially puzzling work like *Endgame*, the online content can also help Steppenwolf to manage expectations and prevent audience alienation. In their podcasts and videos, Steppenwolf artists show that multiple interpretations

are possible and that audiences can actually therefore feel good if they walk away from the theater with more questions than answers. By demonstrating that the meaning of the play is not self-evident, Steppenwolf can transform a potentially confusing experience into an inclusive experience, one in which the audience member walks away from an *Endgame* performance (and post-show discussion) feeling like an insider who “gets” the art.

4. EXTENDING THE RELATIONSHIP THROUGH EVENTS

Beyond the intellectual exchange of the post-show discussions and the rich virtual world at steppenwolf.org, Steppenwolf also hosts a series of “Explore” social events that encourage audience exploration of thematic elements in a relaxed atmosphere. Local Chicago partners set the scene with food, drink, and live music that reflect the themes of the production. Admission is free and open to everyone, including those not attending Steppenwolf productions.

As an example, a recent Explore event from the 2009–2010 season was designed around the theme of imposters for a production of an original Steppenwolf production called *Fake*. The play itself explores the Piltdown Man hoax, an early twentieth-century anthropological fraud in which the purported discovery of a prehistoric skull turned out to be the lower jawbone of an orangutan combined with the skull of a modern man.

Steppenwolf hosted an event that explored the concept of fakery from many angles. Robert Martin, a curator at the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago and an expert on brain size, gave a presentation featuring slides of the Piltdown skull and other objects from a museum show on forgeries that he had curated. For musical entertainment, the event featured a cover band (i.e., a band playing music created by other artists). The

hors d’oeuvres included various culinary sleights of hand, such as meat loaf that had been dressed up to look like cupcakes. The decorations involved a gallery of both real and fake Steppenwolf posters in which guests were encouraged to guess which were phony and which were authentic. Even the corporate sponsor—the satirical newspaper *The Onion*—is itself a master of fake news stories.

Explore events attempt to engage audience members and potential audience members by providing a relaxed atmosphere that differs from both the heady intellectual climate of the post-show discussion and the individual exploration of the online content. The nine events held so far have attracted crowds ranging from 50 up to 230 attendees.

Garrison says that the Explore events tend to be most successful with popular shows and that Steppenwolf has gotten better at organizing and hosting the events as the organization has progressed along a learning curve. The most important lesson: provide opportunities for the audience to engage with the themes in multiple ways.

Steppenwolf programs the Explore events to attract young adults ages twenty to thirty-five, an age group that has been traditionally more difficult for theaters to engage. For the most part, the Explore events hit that target demographic, although the events do also include attendees from other age groups. Those who attend tend to be mostly college educated and frequently cite the event as their first Steppenwolf experience, suggesting that the events are attaining two important objectives: attracting new audiences in the demographic group that Steppenwolf believes shows the greatest potential to support the theater in

STEPPENWOLF STRIVES TO MAKE LIFE-LONG LEARNERS FEEL SMARTER THAN THEY DID WHEN THEY WALKED IN THE DOOR.

the future, and facilitating their exploration of dramatic themes in a way that is designed to be easily accessible.

With all of these ways into the creative process, Steppenwolf has attempted to build relationships with its audience that are not just multi-modal, but also multidimensional. Steppenwolf Artistic Consultant Polly Carl explains that the organization consciously creates multiple layers of experience through which the audience can engage with the company and its work. Once they engage, Carl says, Steppenwolf strives to make these life-long learners “feel smarter than they did when they walked in the door.”

5. CULTIVATING A SOPHISTICATED AUDIENCE

Steppenwolf has given its audience access to artistic discussions online and opened up participation in post-show conversations to all audience members. Through these steps and the Explore series, Steppenwolf has empowered its audience, but as stated earlier Steppenwolf is determined to maintain its role in choosing which works to produce and how to produce them.

“The audience feels utterly involved, but at the same time they are not driving the vision of the art,” says Carl. “Steppenwolf does not build its season by committee. Steppenwolf’s artistic ensemble and staff set the creative vision, and the audience is then invited to be part of the conversation around that vision and the way it plays out.”

By giving audiences multiple ways to explore and engage with the work, the artistic staff delivers a richer experience than if they had just presented the play alone. Audience members can discuss the play and even debate its merits and intent in the post-show discussions, as Steppenwolf moderates a discussion that has no predetermined or definitive conclusions. In effect,

Steppenwolf hopes to create experiences that are as much about the audience’s capacity to appreciate a diverse range of productions as they are about the audience’s enjoyment of a particular play. Even if an audience member does not like a particular play, he or she can have a positive experience through the discussion and debate that follows.

As Polly Carl explains, providing this opportunity for dialogue and, in the process, cultivating an audience that appreciates a wide range of theatrical productions is particularly important for a risk-taking company like Steppenwolf:

If your theater becomes about “I liked it” or “I didn’t like it,” then your ability to take risks starts to go to zero. You end up choosing productions based on what you hope or believe the audience might like. On the other hand, if you have audience members who can converse about the theater at a variety of levels and have discussions where people say, “I did not like this, but I’m interested to talk about why I didn’t like it,” then you have given yourself enormous freedom to choose the canvas on which you create your art.

Admittedly, Steppenwolf is fortunate to be located in a city and region that are home to a vibrant theater audience. As one sign, the focus groups revealed that Steppenwolf’s audience trusts and expects the company to produce adventuresome and challenging work.

Steppenwolf may appear to rely primarily on its artistic agenda when deciding which plays to perform, but in fact Steppenwolf always keeps high-level audience desires foremost in mind when planning its season, by focusing on the audience’s experience and motives for coming to the theater. Specifically,

Steppenwolf seeks to develop programming that transcends like or dislike of individual plays to focus on its audience's desire to be simultaneously challenged and entertained within the context of a trusted relationship.

6. TREATING NON-SUBSCRIBERS AND SUBSCRIBERS EQUALLY WELL

Steppenwolf and many other theater companies are struggling with lost revenue from a diminished subscriber base, but Lavey, Hawkanson, and the rest of Steppenwolf's leaders believe that these financial troubles are only a symptom of changes in the way individuals now seek to engage with the arts.¹⁴ By its actions, Steppenwolf demonstrates its belief that a significant segment of the arts audience is no longer satisfied with passively renewing its subscription year after year to sit in a darkened room and passively absorb art. Audience members want to feel a deeper connection with the art itself, the producers of that art, and others in the audience. At Steppenwolf, they want to feel like they are part of a conversation that builds bridges to their own and to others' experiences.

Not only does this changing relationship with the audience represent an evolution for Steppenwolf, it also represents an evolution for the subscription model in general. What Steppenwolf wants to do is build a deeper relationship with all audi-

14. See also Steven J. Tepper and Yang Gao, "Engaging Art: What Counts?," in *Engaging Art: The Next Great Transformation of America's Cultural Life*, eds. Steven J. Tepper and Bill Ivey (New York: Routledge, 2008), 17-47; Lynne Conner, "In and Out of the Dark," in *Engaging Art: The Next Great Transformation of America's Cultural Life*, eds. Steven J. Tepper and Bill Ivey (New York: Routledge, 2008), 103-124. Tepper & Gao (2008) suggest that documented participation declines may reflect changes in how people participate, with many newer forms of participation remaining unmeasured. In a similar spirit, Conner (2008) suggests that, with reference to the theater specifically, audiences may be looking for a more active role in creating meaning.

ence members, one in which the relationship is founded not on a commitment to see a season of shows and an annual appeal for renewal, but instead on ongoing emotional and intellectual engagement.

Non-subscribers have just as much access to this relationship as subscribers. Steppenwolf will continue to reward its subscribers with ticket-related advantages such as guaranteed seats to subscription performances, advance sale opportunities on non-subscription performances, and discounts on additional tickets to subscription performances. In addition, high-level donors have access to social events like private receptions and cocktail parties with Steppenwolf artists. However, when it comes to the relationship with the work on stage, the company is committed to giving subscribers and non-subscribing ticket buyers alike equal opportunities to build a deeper relationship with the theater.

Steppenwolf's director of marketing and communications, Linda Garrison, acknowledges that subscriber exclusivity may no longer be enough to prompt the deep audience commitment implied in a subscription. "That's why we've decided that we are going to open up access to our organization," says Garrison. "Subscribers do get first choice for attending certain events up to a certain date, but after that, the events are open to everybody."

This decoupling of subscribing and exclusivity runs counter to conventional wisdom behind the subscription model that served organizations well for decades until recently. The subscription model typically combined access with exclusivity, giving loyal subscribers "insider" status in return for a steady revenue stream. But as the percentage of subscribers in Steppenwolf's audience declined and the percentage of single-ticket buyers climbed, Lavey no longer saw the value of giving the cold shoulder to audience members who might only see one or two shows

per season but still feel an emotional connection to Steppenwolf. “Why should we undermine our standing with those people by speaking to them in a way that makes them feel excluded from some inner circle?” Lavey asks rhetorically.

This thinking also goes beyond how many theaters think of single-ticket buyers today. While many theaters see single-ticket buyers as fickle customers who will only come to the hits and the events, Steppenwolf recognizes them as lifelong learners with the potential to have deeper relationships with the theater.

While not denying the artistic benefits of a season that allows the theater to carry on a conversation over multiple plays, Steppenwolf is determined to facilitate audience engagement at the show level. For example, non-subscribers and subscribers are both equally welcome to attend the Explore social events based around the themes of specific Steppenwolf productions. In fact, since Explore attendees do not even need to purchase a ticket for the show itself, and admission is free,¹⁵ Steppenwolf can use the events to expand engagement beyond subscribers and non-subscribers to include members of the community who may not yet have attended a single production. And as stated earlier, many attendees are first-time visitors.

15. Steppenwolf strives to keep the cost of producing each event below \$2,000.

RESULTS

1. TICKET SALES: SINGLE-TICKET BUYERS BECOME REPEAT VISITORS

Ticket sales data shows that Steppenwolf has made progress toward its goal of converting non-subscribing single-ticket buyers into multi-performance ticket buyers. Table 1 shows that in the baseline 2006–2007 season, Steppenwolf had 11,499 households of single-ticket buyers in its audience. Just over 12% of these households (1,416) attended more than one subscription series production and thus qualified as non-subscribing multi-performance ticket buyers.

THE TOTAL NUMBER OF NON-SUBSCRIBING MULTI-TICKET BUYERS GREW 61% OVER THE BASELINE.

In 2007–2008 (Year 1), the number of non-subscriber households jumped to 14,427. Many of these non-subscribing new audience members most likely were drawn to Steppenwolf by that season’s acclaimed original production *August: Osage County*. Within that non-subscriber audience segment, the percentage of multi-performance ticket buyers barely moved, inching up by about half a percentage point (to 12.8%). On the other hand, given the larger pool of non-subscribing ticket buyers, this steady percentage represented 30% year-over-year growth in the audience of non-subscribing multi-performance ticket buyers.

The 2008–2009 (Year 2) numbers are even more encouraging: 2,281 non-subscribing ticket-buying households bought

Table 1. Steppenwolf Non-Subscribers Buying Tickets to Multiple Performances

	Year 0: Baseline 2006–2007	Year 1: 2007–2008	Year 2: 2008–2009
Non-subscriber ticket-buying households	11,499	14,427	14,749
Multi-performance ticket-buying households	1,416	1,844 (+ 30% vs. baseline)	2,281 (+61% vs. baseline)

Source: Steppenwolf Theatre Company

tickets to multiple performances, representing a hefty 61% gain over the baseline number, as well as a higher percentage of the total non-subscriber ticket-buying households (15.5%, compared to the baseline’s 12.3%).

Interestingly, Steppenwolf’s efforts to woo non-subscribing single-ticket buyers have not detracted from its subscription renewal efforts. To the contrary and in the midst of a recession, Steppenwolf’s subscription renewal rates have risen from 78% in 2006–2007 and 79% in 2007–2008 to 85% in 2008–2009, widening the gap with the industry average (which stood at 73% in 2009 having generally held steady over the prior four years).¹⁶ In the 2009–2010 season, Steppenwolf’s subscription renewal rate declined slightly to 82%.

While Steppenwolf has fared relatively well with its subscription renewals, the organization has still encountered the same difficulties as many other theater companies in attracting new subscribers. New annual subscriptions continue to trend downward. As a result, despite Steppenwolf’s high renewal rates, the total number of subscribers has slipped somewhat during

16. Voss et al. (2009), 18.

the last two years.

Steppenwolf’s success in stimulating multi-performance ticket purchases by single-ticket buyers has helped to soften the sting of its declining subscriber base as rising single-ticket revenues have compensated for lost subscription revenue. Marketing expenditures have held fairly steady over this same period.

As the trend lines for single-ticket sales and subscriptions head in opposite directions, single-ticket sales have naturally grown to become a more important component of Steppenwolf’s sales revenue. In the baseline 2006–2007 season, single-ticket revenue from the five-play subscription series accounted for 25% of total sales revenue. Over the next two seasons, the percentage of sales revenue coming from single-ticket sales grew to almost 30% in 2007–2008 and nearly 32% in 2008–2009.

By industry standards, single-ticket revenue still represents a relatively *small* percentage of Steppenwolf’s overall sales revenue. On average, American theater companies now derive more than half their ticket revenue from single-ticket sales.¹⁷ On the surface, this gap in single-ticket revenue between Steppen-

17. Voss et al. (2009), 6.

wolf and the average U.S. theater company could make it appear as though Steppenwolf is lagging in its efforts to attract single-ticket buyers, but we know that Steppenwolf has achieved a 61% jump in the number of multi-performance ticket buyers over the past two years. In reality, single-ticket sales only constitute a relatively small percentage of sales revenue because Steppenwolf has been far more successful than its peers at maintaining high subscription renewal rates.

2. POST-SHOW DISCUSSIONS ATTENDED BY A MINORITY OF THE AUDIENCE

Post-show discussions follow all Steppenwolf performances. Since the program began in the 2006–2007 season, Steppenwolf has measured attendance for shows in the subscription series. Table 2 shows the total audience for those performances, and the percentage attending post-show discussions, which has fluctuated between 12% and approximately 16%. Attendance on any given night depends on factors like length of the play, weather, and day of the week, but the post-show discussions have become a regular component of each Steppenwolf production regardless of these factors.

The post-show discussions play an important role in deep-

ening Steppenwolf’s relationship with a segment of its audience, but not everyone stays, so Steppenwolf has turned to other engagement strategies—particularly using online channels—to reach a wider cross section of its audience.

3. ONLINE CONTENT ACCESS GROWS STEADILY

Steppenwolf’s website attracts a large, growing audience of viewers, readers, and listeners. The table on the next page (Table 3, Steppenwolf.org Website Visits) shows the number of visits to the site overall and to the blog in the baseline year and subsequent two years. Trends in U.S. Internet use are provided as a comparison. At the start of the grant period (2006–2007, also known as “Year 0”), steppenwolf.org had already attracted nearly a half-million visits. During this same time period, the Pew Research Center estimated that 46% of U.S. adults used the Internet on a given day.

During the first year (2007–2008) that Steppenwolf focused on bringing its video content from YouTube to the Steppenwolf website and supplementing those videos with articles, photos, and podcasts, the number of visits increased by 13%, neatly matching the overall rise in U.S. adult Internet usage.

The following year (Year 2, 2008–2009), the first full year

Table 2. Attendance at Post-Show Discussions

Season	Audience Size	Post-Show Discussion Attendance	% Audience for Post-Show Discussion
2006-2007	124,962	19,702	15.8%
2007-2008	134,870	16,211	12.0%
2008-2009	125,607	16,476	13.1%

Table 3. Steppenwolf.org Website Visits

	Year 0: Baseline 2006–2007	Year 1: 2007–2008	Year 2: 2008–2009
Website visits	479,412	541,046 (+13%)	601,392 (+11%)
<i>Percentage of U.S. adults who used Internet on any given day</i>	46%	52% (+13%)	55% (+6%)
Blog visits	52,076	77,147 (+48%)	79,318 (+3%)
<i>Percentage of U.S. adults who visited a blog on a given day</i>	7%	8% (+14%)	7.4% (-8%)

Data on U.S. adult Internet usage from Pew Research Center–Internet and American Life Project, <http://pewinternet.org/Trend-Data/Usage-Over-Time.aspx>, accessed on March 16, 2010.

of extended online production content, visits to steppenwolf.org climbed another 11%, this time outpacing the 6% national increase in Internet usage.

Growth trends in the blog audience have been somewhat erratic. In Year 1 (2007–2008), Steppenwolf saw a phenomenal 48% jump in its blog audience over baseline Year 0. Some of this growth may be attributed to the publicity surrounding that year’s aforementioned smash hit, *August: Osage County*. The blog audience essentially held steady in Year 2, actually rising 3% and going against a national trend that saw daily blog audiences fall by 8% in 2008–2009.

Steppenwolf’s website does serve multiple purposes beyond sharing production information with the audience. The site also fulfills box office functions, provides practical nuts-and-bolts information on attending a Steppenwolf production, presents educational initiatives, allows donors to make contributions, and gives historical background on the ensemble and its members. Steppenwolf’s website statistics show that steppenwolf.org visi-

tors spend most of their time on the home and box office pages. The individual production pages containing video, podcasts, and image content are the third most popular destination in terms of time spent.

The Watch & Listen section of steppenwolf.org, which serves as a hub for production-related content from multiple shows, was launched at the end of Year 1. In its first two years, Watch & Listen received 136,694 visits, accounting for 12% of the visits to steppenwolf.org. Nearly half of the visits to Watch & Listen originated from geographic locations very close to Steppenwolf. Illinois-based Internet users accounted for 43% of Watch & Listen visits, with the vast majority of this website traffic originating in Chicago or its suburbs. Watch & Listen visitors accessed more than 1.7 million unique page views, including 575,000 video views, over 1,000,000 photo gallery views, and over 175,000 podcast streams.

In addition to the Watch & Listen and production pages hosted on its own website, Steppenwolf has had a presence on

Table 4. Steppenwolf Content on External Social Media Sites

	Date Started	Followers	Content Views
YouTube	March 2007	334*	187,000 through 9/2010
Facebook	September 2009	9,600	Approximately 35,000 through 9/2010
Twitter	September 2009	3,200	N/A (Twitter does not provide these statistics)
Watch & Listen, steppenwolf.org	July 2008	N/A	1,764,340 **

Sources: Youtube.com, Facebook.com, Twitter.com, Steppenwolf Theatre Company

* On YouTube, it is not necessary to be a follower in order to search for or view content.
** This figure includes over 575,000 video views, over 1,000,000 photo gallery views, and over 175,000 podcast streams.

YouTube since March 2007 and more recently has established a presence on Facebook, Twitter, and the photo-sharing site Flickr (starting in mid-2009). This content has proved popular in its own right—generating 187,000 content views on YouTube and attracting thousands of followers on Facebook and Twitter, but the activity on these third-party sites still amounts to only a fraction of the site traffic on Steppenwolf’s own website (See Table 4, Steppenwolf Content on External Social Media Sites).

4. THE ARTISTIC MISSION IS STRENGTHENED

Steppenwolf’s efforts to deepen and improve its audience relationships, particularly with single-ticket buyers, appear to have had a number of positive measurable effects on audience retention, attraction, and engagement. Steppenwolf seems equally pleased with the effects these initiatives have had on the organization itself. Artistic Director Martha Lavey believes

the impact has been huge, giving Steppenwolf artists important insights into the composition and mind-set of its audience members and thereby making them feel more connected to the audience. As Lavey says:

All these conversations on artistic themes and the meaning of the plays filter back to the artists who look at the audience and think, “Wow, this is a really smart group of people. We can trust them.” It is incredibly moving to hear audience members talk about their own histories and the way the play impacts them personally. ... [As a result] the artists have grown more trusting of the audience.

As the actors come to feel a sense of kinship and connection with the audience, Lavey says, that sense of community spreads throughout the organization. The artists have come to understand that the audience is there to support them, not attack

them, which, Lavey says, enables the artists to bring a greater “generosity of heart” to their performances.

Moreover, the process of having Steppenwolf artists create online content such as podcasts and take on more prominent roles in promoting the productions has given the performers a concrete sense of conversation with an online audience that uses comments to respond to and participate in a dialogue. These conversations strengthen the bonds of trust between audience and performer, which Lavey in turn believes allows the performers to do their best work. “Increasingly we see the ensemble as extending into the larger sphere of the community,” explains Lavey. “There is a sense that the audience is invested in the production with us.”

Although it may seem counterintuitive, encouraging a dialogue with the audience has actually given Steppenwolf artists greater creative freedom. Steppenwolf artists have felt liberated by the knowledge that their audience *wants* to be challenged. This has allowed Steppenwolf to make bolder programming choices and taken some of the worry out of decision making. As Hawkanson says:

We have more artistic confidence to do a wider and more challenging range of material than ever before. The conversations we have internally about new seasons have changed from the ones we had five years ago, when there was more of a consciousness about the presence of new vs. established plays during the season. That's no longer on the table. Now our programming conversations revolve around the exploration of art and ideas, what projects the artists want to do, what our writers are trying to do. Thinking this way has given the artists a stronger platform in which they do not feel manipulated or smothered by management.

RESULTS DRIVERS

We have identified five key drivers that appear to enable Steppenwolf to successfully advance its efforts to deepen audience relationships. The first three link to the ways Steppenwolf enhanced the audience experience, and the remaining two describe key steps Steppenwolf took to enhance the organization’s ability to deliver on the vision of the engagement strategy.

1. USING AUDIENCE RESEARCH AS A DECISION-MAKING TOOL

One key driver of success has been Steppenwolf’s decision to move beyond intuition and develop a clear understanding of the audience through formal research. The understanding of the identity and desires of the audience has given Steppenwolf staff a sense of purpose and clarity about the kind of relationship they want to build in order to deliver the experience their audience seeks.

Details on audience motivations for attending Steppenwolf have proven particularly useful for the artistic and marketing departments, helping both of those departments to form clearer portraits of their audience. The process of conducting the research had the added benefit of bringing the departments closer together: they worked alongside each other to figure out how marketing could best appeal to the audience’s lifelong learners through communications, while artistic gave this audience segment what it wanted through performance and dialogue.

The twin objectives of wanting to understand and engage

the audience continue to drive collaboration between the two departments. “Marketing brings to the table all the research and such that we do, while artistic brings to the table what they see over the footlights and in post-show discussions,” says Garrison. “There is a constant flow of ‘I heard this, I saw this’ conversation. Everyone is always thinking about who’s in the theater seats. Everyone wants to contribute to improving that understanding of the audience.” With this common purpose, the two departments have developed a closer collaborative rapport.

The detailed knowledge from audience research has provided information useful at the tactical level as well. For example, Steppenwolf used to regularly provide logistical information (i.e., directions to the theater, where to park, etc.) as part of its marketing campaign for individual productions (note that individual productions are marketed to single-ticket buyers). But the focus groups showed that single-ticket buyers already had a high awareness of these details, allowing the marketing department to downplay logistics and focus more on the thematic content of the work being performed.

Finally, a shared internal understanding of the audience’s identity, preferences, and aspirations has made Steppenwolf nimbler and more efficient by removing much of the guesswork from important decisions. Without hard facts from the formal research, Garrison suggests that there would “probably be a lot more debate on any given initiative, because we all would have different opinions on who was in the audience.”

2. UNDERSTANDING WHAT AUDIENCES ARE SEEKING

There is a stereotype that artistic staff at performing arts organizations might be reluctant to hear market research for fear of losing some control over defining their artistic agenda. But Steppenwolf’s experience has shown that market research

can actually be *liberating* for the artistic department. With focus groups showing that the audience expected Steppenwolf productions to be bold and provocative, the artistic staff felt they had a huge amount of support from that audience to produce the edgy and challenging work that they had been producing. This qualitative research confirmed for the artistic staff that what Steppenwolf’s ensemble members valued about themselves (i.e., their commitment to original, thought-provoking drama) was the same thing the audience valued.

Even better, by building an open dialogue with its audience, Steppenwolf found a way to help audience members connect to even the most challenging works. This knowledge that Steppenwolf would have opportunities to give audience members entry points into the work has made Steppenwolf less reluctant to push artistic boundaries. The post-show dialogues and online comments let Steppenwolf monitor audience reaction in real time.

Steppenwolf’s experience shows the importance of having an artistic director—in this case, Martha Lavey—who is interested in discovering more about what audiences are looking for. “Martha finds the research intellectually challenging,” says Hawkanson. “She doesn’t see it as a threat. As more and more research comes out, she has incorporated the research findings into her way of thinking and her way of developing programs for the audiences.”

Steppenwolf has also made sure to distribute and discuss its research findings throughout the entire organization, from the staff to the board, so that everyone works from a shared, fact-based understanding of what Steppenwolf audiences are looking for. Garrison notes that people pay attention to the data because they know it has the imprimatur of both the artistic director and the executive director. Having a common view of the audience has made it easier for the organization to gain momentum around the relationship-building initiative because everyone has

the same insights into the audience mind-set.

Hawkanson believes that the board's familiarity with the research makes it easier to obtain their support of Steppenwolf's efforts to build audience relationships and the resources needed to support those initiatives. When new audience research is conducted, the results are presented to the board at its next regularly scheduled meeting. Naturally, debates *do* take place over particular initiatives and how best to engage the audience, but no one in the organization doubts that Steppenwolf's role is to create theater that challenges lifelong learners and to provide tools and opportunities for them to connect with the work.

3. CREATING A BROADER EXPERIENCE TO BUILD STRONGER RELATIONSHIPS

In considering the audience experience, Steppenwolf has thought well beyond the experience of the work on stage. While productions remain the core focus of the organization, Steppenwolf recognized that if it continued to sell single-ticket buyers one show at a time, then single-ticket buyers would continue to buy tickets one show at a time. To attract single-ticket buyers to multiple shows, Steppenwolf felt that it would need to create a broader Steppenwolf experience that intersected with the intellectual lives of its audience members in multiple ways.

This focus on building loyalty through a broader engagement corresponds with the latest thinking on branding and customer experience, which balances the traditional aspects of brand building, such as logos and written communications, with a greater emphasis on the various "touch points" that customers or audience members might have with an organization.¹⁸ Work along these lines has strongly advocated developing audi-

18. See, for example, Scott M. Davis and Michael Dunn, *Building the Brand-Driven Business* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002).

ence affinity and loyalty by creating a strong overall experience that matches what audiences are seeking and that draws on a set of compelling and well-defined organizational values.

Steppenwolf pays careful attention to the things that are typically thought of as branding. Steppenwolf communications have a consistent look and feel, logo placement is prominent, and marketing staff ensure that all written and visual communications have a similar voice, whether in print or online. But Steppenwolf has gone beyond "look and feel" to design an engagement strategy based on making its brand have deeper purpose and meaning for lifelong learners in its audience. And there is internal consistency at all of the touch points: the post-show discussions have been crafted to encourage intellectual exploration and discourse, the digital content on the web featuring artists talking to the audience about the work has a strong sense of purpose around thematic exploration, and the Explore events provide additional access into some of the most prominent themes of Steppenwolf productions. These elements are all designed to accomplish similar objectives, and thereby reinforce one another and produce a "look and feel" consistency around the experience.

4. ALIGNING THE ORGANIZATION AROUND THE "PUBLIC SQUARE" VISION AND STRATEGY

It is one thing to have a clever vision and strategy; the most successful organizations are those that find ways to articulate that vision for staff and build mechanisms to bring the vision to life.¹⁹ Steppenwolf has put great effort into clarifying its objectives internally around the relationship mandate. As Hawkanson says, "We've worked to ensure that Steppenwolf speaks on these

19. For a thorough treatment of how visions become enacted in leading organizations, see Jim Collins and Jerry I. Porras, *Built to Last: Successful Habits of Visionary Companies* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994).

issues with a very consistent voice. [Thanks to these efforts] we've managed to get everyone in the same place on the Public Square and related issues.”

Because the relationship-building idea came from the artistic department, Hawkanson knew that Steppenwolf would need to invest time and effort into making sure that the entire organization adopted the concept as part of its vocabulary. He wanted its entire staff to feel as if they were participating in building the Public Square.²⁰ To achieve organizational clarity on what the Public Square concept meant for Steppenwolf's productions and operations, Hawkanson led both junior and senior management staff on a multi-day retreat where they could reach consensus on the purpose and goals of the Public Square.

Steppenwolf continues to use the Public Square concept as an internal metaphor in assessing its commitment to the relationship-building initiatives. At the major organization-wide staff meetings that occur five times per year, each department discusses its activities in terms of the Public Square. For example, members of the Costume Shop recently spoke about what they are doing to share their work at Steppenwolf with the broader community.

By building consensus early on, Steppenwolf has achieved remarkable clarity throughout the organization on the role that different departments and staff members should play in helping to build and deepen audience relationships. Everyone is on the same page. Regardless of seniority or role, all the staff members interviewed for this case study referenced three core concepts in our discussions:

- Steppenwolf's audience is made up of “lifelong learners.”

20. The metaphor of the “Public Square” is widely used internally to align staff around the relationship-building initiatives, but it does not appear in promotions or other audience communications.

- The Public Square is an apt metaphor for understanding the emerging relationship between Steppenwolf and its audience.
- Steppenwolf's role in the Public Square is to create theater, invite the audience to discuss it, and gradually increase the audience's critical ability to assess, observe, and discuss the production's dramatic elements.

Steppenwolf staff members can all articulate these ideas and how they apply to their own roles. For example:

- Deb Stewart, director of foundations and government relations, said the new approach to building a closer relationship with the audience has helped Steppenwolf to “become better listeners. We understand the value of listening to them as much as they listen to us.”
- Marketing Coordinator Julia Dosset put it this way: “A relationship with the audience needs to be a two-way street. The whole organization embraces this concept, which is pushed from the top. In marketing, we talk about this relationship a lot. We understand that we manage the conversation and much of what the audience hears about Steppenwolf.”

Dosset's and Stewart's statements may at first appear unsurprising, since they simply reinforce the same themes outlined by Lavey and Hawkanson, but in fact they are extremely revealing precisely because they show the depth to which the relationship message has penetrated the organization.

In many arts organizations, marketing and promotion departments are focused on communicating *outward* and disseminating a message. At Steppenwolf, even these departments recognize the importance of receiving *incoming* messages from the audience. All of Steppenwolf has embraced the concept of the conversational relationship with the audience. By investing in building cross-functional consensus around the Public Square

concept, Steppenwolf has succeeded in creating an organization in which everyone feels responsible for deepening the audience relationship and has the ability to contribute to the goal of developing the Public Square.

5. ENCOURAGING CROSS-FUNCTIONAL COLLABORATION

It is natural for each department in an organization to have its own tasks and responsibilities. To maximize impact, however, each department's efforts must complement those of other departments and support one vision of the organization's overall strategic goals. Without such cross-department coordination, the overall organization loses efficiency and effectiveness as each department chooses its own path or, in a worst-case scenario, cancels out the efforts of another department by pursuing a conflicting goal.

This problem is certainly not unique to arts organizations. Companies in every industry struggle to prevent the development of isolated "silos" within their organizations and the construction of "firewalls" that block coordination and communication between different departments such as marketing and artistic.

To prevent silo formation and break down any nascent firewalls, Steppenwolf actively promotes cross-functional teamwork. For example, the artistic staff are involved in marketing operations and vice versa. "If the artistic team does not actively participate and have a voice [in cross-functional projects], then the institution's conversation with its audience loses a critical component," says Hawkanson. "We want all our departments working in collaboration with our artistic team, which is why for the past three years the organization has made a concerted effort to structure its operations in a way that promotes interdepartmental engagement and dialogue."

In practice, the Public Square serves as a good metaphor both for Steppenwolf's engagement with its audience and also for the way the organization promotes internal collaboration and dialogue. At Steppenwolf, artistic drives the discussion on the new audience relationship, but everyone participates. For example, marketing specialists leverage their specialties and lead promotions, communications, and web development initiatives, but artistic participates in all these processes by attending meetings, providing input, attending focus groups, and more. Marketing has authority over its own sphere of operations, but recognizes that all its actions must serve artistic productions and reflect the mission and values of the organization.

As Garrison says, "Marketing is the task leader, but artistic team members are full-blown participants." To provide another example of cross-functional collaboration, the entire organization participates in artistic development meetings that are typically the domain of only the artistic staff at other theaters. Task leaders therefore have an easier time carrying out the artistic mission and acting in line with the company's creative intent. Vince Amatuzzi, who had been until recently the digital assets manager at Steppenwolf, had a background in sports marketing before joining Steppenwolf. Nonetheless, within just three months, he had embraced the artistic mission and found ways to incorporate it into his day-to-day responsibilities. As Amatuzzi described one recent interdepartmental meeting:

On Tuesday we did the reading for In the Red and Brown Water, one of the plays in The Brother/Sister Plays. Everybody in the organization was there. Afterwards we had a big discussion, mostly an artistic conversation. ... So even when we break it down and start getting into

BUILDING CAPABILITIES INTERNALLY AS OPPOSED TO OUTSOURCING

Steppenwolf developed both the online content and the post-show discussion components of its engagement strategy within its existing operational structure, as opposed to outsourcing development or creating a new committee to oversee engagement.

To showcase the online content, Steppenwolf reorganized its website for easier navigation and added podcasting functionality to the site's existing video capabilities. One full-time staff member was hired and given responsibility for producing the online content associated with each show, including videos, podcasts, and picture galleries. To enable in-house podcast production, Steppenwolf purchased all the necessary audio and video tools, including editing and recording software, a microphone, a video camera, and a new Mac computer.

Because the intent of the online content is to extend the artists' ongoing conversation to the audience, the videos and podcasts tend to use material that is readily available, particularly the conversations among artists that occur in the process of producing the work on stage. The website does feature picture galleries, including production shots and scenes from rehearsals, set construction, and production meetings, as well as a few short clips of staged Steppenwolf productions, but the vast majority of video and podcast content consists of dialogue, interviews, and commentary by ensemble members and artistic staff.

The video and podcasts are not scripted, so the only pro-

duction costs involved in creating the online content are those associated with filming, recording, and editing. Steppenwolf estimates that videos cost three times as much to produce as podcasts because of the time involved, but the videos receive many more views than the podcasts, and Steppenwolf staffers believe they are therefore worth the extra expense.

The other key engagement capability added has been the post-show discussion. The majority of these are led by Steppenwolf artistic and production staff (although some are led by trained and coached visitors from local universities who are paid a small honorarium). Because these discussions are seen as a critical part of maintaining the conversation with the audience, job descriptions for artistic staff have been expanded to make leading the discussions a part of ongoing responsibilities. There is no set formula for who leads the post-show discussions on any given evening, and responsibility is shared among artistic Steppenwolf staff and artistic production staff, as designated by the artistic department. Because responsibility is shared in this way, leadership of the post-show discussions has not become a great burden to any one artistic or production staff member.

As a whole, Steppenwolf's engagement strategy does place demands on staff time and requires a monetary investment associated with software, hardware, and a single dedicated employee. Despite the costs, Garrison feels these initiatives are absolutely essential to deepening audience engagement. In determining where to allocate resources, she states, "Our guiding principle for engagement initiatives is to find compelling venues for the artist to engage the audience about the work on stage."

marketing-specific discussions, we've been involved with the other departments from the very beginning, and we all are on the same page about how to look at a production.

The picture emerges of an organization aligned and oriented toward one magnetic north. Hawkanson expressed the same sentiment as many of his colleagues when he said, “We

“WE PUT THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE AUDIENCE RELATIONSHIP AT THE CORE OF OUR OPERATIONS. IT’S NOT A MARKETING PROGRAM. IT’S NOT A DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM. IT’S NOT EVEN A CURATORIAL PROGRAM. IT IS AN ACROSS-THE-BOARD PROGRAM.”

—Executive Director David Hawkanson

It is an across-the-board program.” As explained in the sidebar, *Building Capabilities Internally as Opposed to Outsourcing*, the program has been integrated into Steppenwolf’s ongoing operations; it is not an add-on initiative.

The artistic department may have originated the audience relationship-building idea, and marketing may have spearheaded the creation of the engagement strategy, but such distinctions have largely become irrelevant as the entire organization has embraced the initiative. Since everyone has taken ownership, everyone also feels they share to some degree in the program’s successes. Conversely, when setbacks do occur, the shared feeling of ownership removes the temptation to engage in unproductive finger-pointing.

GOING FORWARD: WILL A SUSTAINABLE RELATIONSHIP LEAD TO CONTRIBUTIONS?

Subscribers do more than subscribe and provide a dependable stream of earned ticket income. They also have a long tradition of contributing in excess of their ticket purchases. At Steppenwolf, for example, subscribers account for 85% of individual contributions. As subscriptions continue to decline in theaters across America, that contributed income will need to be replaced.

Right now, single-ticket buyers—even non-subscribers who purchase tickets to multiple performances—are not contributing at nearly the same level as subscribers. If Steppenwolf continues to forge a stronger relationship with these single-ticket buyers and draw them back to the theater again and again, will they start to show the same contribution patterns as subscribers?

Hawkanson believes that it is only a matter of time before the contribution levels equalize between subscribers and non-subscribing multi-ticket buyers. He feels that subscribers donate to the theater not because they are subscribers per se, but because they have a long-standing relationship with the theater. Hawkanson thinks that Steppenwolf subscribers celebrate and support the artistic risks the company takes because they, too, see themselves as risk takers and therefore identify with Steppenwolf. As Steppenwolf develops a similar relationship with single-ticket buyers, Hawkanson feels the company should be able to increase average contribution levels among them as well.

On the development side, Deb Stewart recognizes that relationships are the key to building those bonds of identification and loyalty between Steppenwolf and its audience. “Strangers are not going to be our long-term supporters,” she says.

Linda Garrison believes that the old pathway to which theaters aspired (single-ticket buyer → multi-performance ticket buyer → subscriber → donor) is losing traction, so instead she has turned her department’s attention toward building long-term relationships.

Essentially, Steppenwolf is in uncharted territory in its efforts to cultivate deeper audience relationships with non-subscribing multi-performance ticket buyers. The focus groups indicate that these non-subscribers feel the same sense of belonging as subscribers, which could indicate that the non-subscribers might be just as likely to contribute if Steppenwolf’s relationship-building efforts succeed. The truth is that Steppenwolf is still deep in discovery mode, searching for patterns and trying to understand psychological aspects of purchase behavior and the resulting implications for donations.

For now, Steppenwolf is moving forward with its goal of building deeper audience relationships, using the theater as the focal point to create a sense of community and engage the audience in dialogue with the artists and with one another. Moving forward, Steppenwolf is expanding its relationship-building activities in ways that encourage intergenerational dialogue within its audience and provide opportunities for young artists to produce work that engages young audiences. After researching how this young audience thinks about theater, Steppenwolf has begun to develop programs, content, and events that enable young artists to engage the next generation of Steppenwolf’s audience and encourage them to fully participate in the Public Square.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- Do you know what drives single-ticket buyers to return to your organization? How might you build a relationship that converts them to multi-performance ticket buyers? What kind of relationship would complement their values (e.g., lifelong learning)?
- Steppenwolf has opened the creative process to its audience in a way that appears to be deepening engagement. Organizations may be missing an opportunity by keeping this process—which is already happening—behind closed doors and curtains. Are there ways for your organization to share the process, either online or in person? Can that sharing be used to create an audience of critical thinkers with a greater ability to appreciate multiple facets of the art you are producing and/or presenting?
- Does your organization treat subscribers and non-subscribers differently? Is this preferential treatment helping to retain subscribers? Can you think of ways to provide benefits or services to non-subscribers that might help strengthen relationships with this portion of your audience?
- Does your organization have a clearly defined strategy and goals for its online presence? How does your existing online content help you to achieve those strategic objectives?

ABOUT THE LEAD AUTHOR

Bob Harlow, PhD, develops custom research programs that help organizations identify how their brands, offerings, and messages intersect with what matters most to their target audiences. He has held senior and management positions at IBM and at market research consulting groups such as Yankelovich Partners, RONIN, and KRC, and currently leads Bob Harlow Research and Consulting, LLC, a market research consulting organization. He has partnered with marketing managers and senior executives at some of the world's largest companies and leading nonprofit organizations to build brands, target offerings, and design effective communications supporting them.

Bob has written hundreds of surveys and conducted hundreds of focus groups and interviews with broad audiences in thirty countries. He has more than a dozen scholarly publications in social psychology and research methods. He has a PhD from Princeton University in social psychology and completed the postdoctoral program in quantitative analysis at New York University's Stern School of Business and Graduate School of Arts and Science. He speaks English, Spanish, French, and Portuguese.

WATCH & LISTEN

Learn more about Steppenwolf, our ensemble and our productions on the **Watch & Listen** section of steppenwolf.org. Videos, podcasts, photo galleries and articles—in addition to the Steppenwolf blog—can all be found online. Go backstage and check out what our artists find most important about their work on all three of our stages.

30

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