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Thinking About Audience Research? Four Rules for the Perplexed (Part 1)

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“We just had a planning retreat with some of our board members, and they asked us questions about our audience that we couldn’t answer. So we realized we need to do a survey...”

As a researcher who works with arts organizations and museums, I get that call or email frequently. The marketing director of a theater, classical ensemble, dance company, or art museum will get in touch, often passing along a detailed request-for-proposal for audience research, and sometimes already armed with a list of survey questions that she and her executive director brainstormed together.

“We know what we want to know about our audiences,” she’ll tell me. “We just don’t know the right ways of asking them, or how to analyze the responses.”

My job at those moments? To slow the train down a little and be sure the arts manager is thinking strategically and holistically about research. Her questions and plans may be the right ones. But unless she and her colleagues (including those impatient trustees) consider research in the broader context of institutional goals and strategies, the information they gather is unlikely to be truly useful to their organization.

And useful in this case means: *able to fuel positive change*. Research is about improvement. If you’re not going to program, market, schedule, fundraise, price, package, interact, design, educate, budget, plan, or *something* differently based on what you learn, then why bother asking your audience questions in the first place?

Which brings us to rule number one:

1. Don’t start with what you want to *know*. Start with what you want to *do*.

Nine times out of ten, the conversation about market research at a museum or performing arts organization begins with the question, “What do we need to know about our visitors/subscribers/single ticket buyers/etc.?” Nine times out of nine that’s the wrong question to start with.

What you need to ask first is, “What do we want to be able to *do* with the information we gather?”

The answer to that question can be singular and focused (“We want to write a compelling but realistic strategic plan that our subscribers can get excited about”) or complex and multi-part (“Well, we’re launching a new capital campaign and we want to make sure it’s going to resonate with donors and make our ambitious goal, but also we’ve got a new artistic director and he and our ED are thinking about changing the schedule for next season pretty dramatically. Oh, and we got a grant last year to use social networking to reach younger audiences, but we haven’t made much headway beyond our Facebook page.”)

Notice that those answers use active verbs: these arts professional need to *write*, *launch*, *change*, *reach*, and *make headway*, and they sense — rightly! — that audience research can help them do those things more effectively.

Sounds simple, but you’d be amazed at how many people find it hard to think about research in terms of action. “We just need to know who’s attending,” they say; “we don’t even have that basic information.” No argument there; it’s certainly important to *understand* your audience. It’s just that your understanding will become much sharper and more valuable when it’s organically connected to change.

What do you want to be able to do with the research findings?

- | | |
|------------------|---|
| Experience ●●●● | 1. Inform programming and services decisions |
| Marketing ●●●● | 2. Inform marketing and subscription/membership decisions |
| Fundraising ●●●● | 3. Support development and capital campaign efforts |
| Politics ●●●● | 4. Strengthen collaboration with partner orgs, civic structures, etc. |

So, what are you going to do differently once you know who’s coming? “Well, we’ll be able to see if there are any opportunities to grow ticket sales by targeting certain audiences.”

Now we’re getting somewhere. The goal of “identifying target audience segments” is different from the goal of “knowing who’s attending,” and the two might lead to very different research efforts...only one of which will actually get you where you want to go.

So to be efficient and effective, you have to start by thinking, with your whole team, about the *actions* your research will inform. The table below shows some of the broad areas that research can inform.

(And no, “to be able to tell our funders” is not a good enough reason to conduct research. The next time a funder asks you for information-for-its-own-sake, tell him you’re being more strategic and “planful” than that. Which brings us to rule number two...)

2. Think about a research *plan*, not just a research project.

Piecemeal approaches to research make for scattershot action. Instead of considering a single research project in isolation (for example, a survey of ticket-buyers or a set of donor interviews), create a long-range, strategic research plan that prescribes and integrates various research steps over time.

Having such a plan will help foster a *culture of research and evaluation* in your organization, so that leadership, staff from all departments (including artistic or curatorial), and key board members can set priorities and make decisions based on a clear, multi-dimensional, and evolving picture of their audiences. It will also let you ask the right questions at the right times within your season, making each research step more focused and cost-effective.

And even before you *have* the plan, the process of developing it will be valuable in itself, because it will bring up important questions about what your organization is trying to achieve and for whom.

To some of you, ongoing audience research might sound like a luxury. But it doesn’t have to be expensive; it just needs to be strategic. And because your research plan will help you focus on the specific audience insights you really need in order to drive positive change, you’ll actually save money compared to more impulsive, stop-and-start approaches. And by conducting research regularly, you’ll learn how to do part or all of the process yourselves, so you’ll be able to spend less on outside firms like Slover Linett. (Funders call this “capacity building.” They like it.)

Of course, if you’re currently spending zero dollars on audience research, the new expense will obviously feel like a leap. That’s why many organizations seek grant funding to support their research, at least initially. Yet in the long run, your organization will be better off if you can work research into your annual operating budget, because only then will you be able to maintain an ongoing feedback loop with your audiences and train your colleagues to expect and rely on audience data in their decision-making.

I’m sure you’re getting the idea, so I’ll move more quickly through the next few rules.

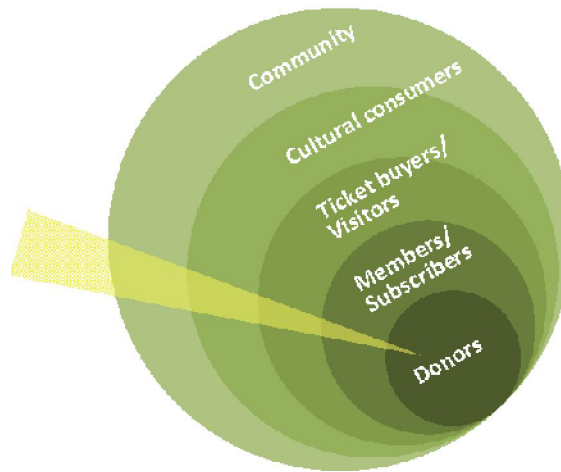
3. Consider *all* your audiences, current and potential.

Your first instinct may be to research the people who are already coming through your doors (ticket buyers, visitors) and especially those who already have a committed relationship with your organization (subscribers, members). But as you develop your research plan, give some thought to those who aren’t yet attending (potential customers), as well as those who are important whether or not they themselves attend (donors, influencers, community leaders, and so on). Ask yourself whether the actions you want to take require a better understanding of those audiences, and what you might be able to

learn from each of them.

It’s sometimes helpful to picture your full potential audience as a set of concentric circles (see diagram). The outer circle is the population of the region or community you serve. Some proportion of that population are cultural consumers. Some of those cultural consumers attend your offerings at least occasionally. Some of *those* attend regularly enough to be subscribers or members. And some proportion of those affiliated audiences are donors or other kinds of supporters.

What audiences can you study?



That’s an oversimplification, of course. You’ll also want to think about a variety of audiences whose definitions that cut across these concentric groups, such as underrepresented ethnic communities, young audiences, tourists to your area, and so on.

The point is that any audience that is on your mind when you’re making marketing or programming decisions should also be on your mind when you’re setting research priorities.

4. Use a mix of research methods for a comprehensive picture.

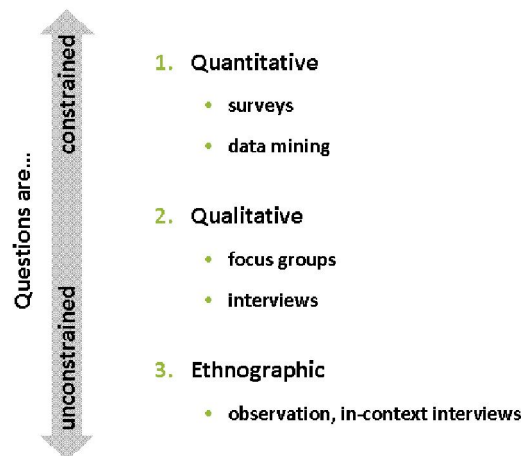
When most people think of market research, they picture a survey of some kind, whether it’s a paper questionnaire inserted into a theater or dance program or a web survey hosted on a site like Survey Monkey. Those are important tools, but here too it pays to consider your full range of options. Sometimes the insights you’re looking for are best obtained through qualitative research, such as focus groups.

To put a complex issue in a nutshell, surveys and other forms of *quantitative* research (so-called because the results are analyzed statistically) are good for times when you want to compare different segments of your audience, measure the prevalence of certain issues or outcomes that you’ve already identified, rank or rate various possibilities (again, that you’ve already defined), or track changes over time.

Focus groups, in-depth interviews, and other forms of *qualitative* research (based on conversation and analyzed thematically) are good at identifying those issues in the first place, exploring subjective perceptions and emotional factors, understanding processes or responses, and generating ideas.

As this diagram suggests, one big difference is that quantitative research is largely “closed-ended,” meaning the audience can only answer the questions you’ve asked, and their responses are limited to the choices or scales you’ve specified. So you need to be sure that the questions are relevant to the ways they think, not just to how you and your

What research tools can you use?



colleagues think. Qualitative research, by contrast, is open-ended, meaning that the audience can bring up issues you didn’t think to ask about, and you (or your research partners) can probe with follow-up questions to get the full story.

There’s also a third category that’s becoming increasingly common in the arts and has long been part of the corporate world’s research and evaluation repertoire: ethnography. This fancy term from the social sciences refers to observational research, where instead of asking questions and listening to the ways people *think*, you’re watching what they actually *do*. The idea is to bypass the rational, consciously-processed interpretations people make about their own decisions and get straight to what we’re all really interested in understanding and influencing: how they experience your arts organization, from the ticketing process to the post-show discussion.

* * *

With those four rules in mind, you’ll be able to take a fresh, strategic look at what you need to know from your audiences and how to go about asking them. There will still be many decisions to make and new skills to learn. But you’ll be starting down the research road in the right direction, and the insights you uncover will have a lasting impact on your organization.