



Audience Development Focus Group Study

Prepared for

**Arts Midwest
and
Minnesota Community Foundation**

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OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

This report summarizes the results of a focus group study conducted by Cincinnatus in January 2009 for Arts Midwest and the Minnesota Community Foundation to understand current marketing needs and practices of arts organizations in the Twin Cities metropolitan area. The overall objective was, through candid discussions with people for whom audience development is part of their job, to inform the process of designing a learning community of local arts organizations with a focus on audience development.

The learning community (or network, as it is often referred to in this report) is expected to launch in 2009 and will be open to all nonprofit arts organizations in the Twin Cities. It is a result of the Wallace Foundation's selection of Minneapolis–St. Paul for its Excellence Initiative, a city-based effort that seeks to build participation in the arts and share lessons learned during a four-year grant period. The Minnesota Community Foundation, which received the Wallace grant, has partnered with Arts Midwest to deliver the learning opportunities.

Cincinnatus facilitated four focus groups of representatives of arts organizations who are responsible for developing audiences or building participation in their organizations. Participants were recruited by telephone from lists provided by Arts Midwest and assigned to groups based roughly on operating budget size: small, mid-sized, and large. A fourth group, consisting of representatives of local arts organizations that received the Wallace Excellence Award (WEA), was also recruited. In all, a total of 28 individuals participated in this study.

It is important to point out that this is a *qualitative* study. Focus groups are widely used research tools and are particularly helpful in understanding the complex, subtle relationship between individuals and a particular service, organization, or concept. Unlike *quantitative* research such as surveys, focus group results are not statistically projectable to a larger population. For example, it is not valid to say that *all* audience development professionals at Twin Cities arts organizations hold the same opinions as those expressed in these focus groups. On the other hand, these in-depth discussions provide a rich source of information about the audience development–related practices, concerns, needs, and dreams of Twin Cities arts organizations.

KEY FINDINGS

Current Situation and Practices

- With significant financial challenges facing them, many Twin Cities arts organizations are becoming more dependent upon earned revenue, much of which is acquired by attracting audiences or participants to their organizations. Public participation and support is key to the survival of most arts organizations. Therefore, the opportunity to become more skilled at audience development practices holds strong appeal for individuals responsible for their organization's marketing and audience development efforts.
- Specific audience development–related challenges faced by arts organizations include tighter advertising budgets, limited staff, loss of traditional media outlets, and an increasing demand for expertise in electronic communications.
- Arts organizations are finding alternatives to traditional advertising and media placements, which are viewed as expensive and questionably effective. With fewer arts reviewers on staff at local newspapers to serve as intermediaries between artists and the public, many organizations are relying on two resources—people and electronic communications—to handle their messaging. Some organizations involve people in a structured way, such as an “ambassador” group that promotes the organization in the community; others, particularly small arts organizations, rely heavily on word-of-mouth and grassroots strategies. Electronic communication has become the norm for many people, and arts organizations recognize the need to invest in this rapidly changing new media.
- Large and small arts organizations are devising ways to increase the number of pathways into their organizations, such as combining a visual art exhibition with performance art, offering classes taught by artists, or holding events related to a performance or exhibition. Large organizations with multidisciplinary offerings are exploring the potential for crossover audiences.

Ideas for an Audience Development Learning Network

- When thinking about what they would like to get from a learning network, many respondents in this study expressed a strong interest in concrete, real-world examples of what works and doesn't work in audience development practices. They want to have candid conversations with other organizations about successes and failures.
- The majority of respondents expressed a strong need for audience research, both qualitative and quantitative, as well as guidance in applying that research to their specific organization. There was interest in establishing a community-wide arts database with demographic and participation information about arts patrons, as well as a strong need for

qualitative research to better understand audience motivations, preferences, and spending tolerances.

- Components of the learning network, as suggested by the participants of this study, include:
 - Best practices
 - Real-world examples successes and failures
 - Audience research and applications
 - Training and skill development in basic audience research techniques (e.g., survey design) and electronic communications/new media
 - Consolidation of existing research and training resources
 - Access to and participation in the national discourse on audience development
 - Insights from experts in the field
 - Theoretical discussions about the value of art in our culture

- Suggested logistics of the learning network include:
 - Convening of the full group twice a year
 - Breakout sessions in smaller groups organized by discipline or interest
 - Continuous learning and information exchange via the Internet
 - Have a mechanism to share what is learned within and beyond the network
 - Create a permanent structure for learning beyond the WEA initiative.

- Learning interests by size of organization include:
 - Large: audience research, cross-discipline opportunities, national discourse on audience development, networking

 - Mid-size: real-world successes and failures; “tools” for audience development; national discourse on audience development

 - Small: technology, theory, and reaching new audiences

Related Issues

- The mid-sized and small groups spent significant time talking about the need to support artists and elevate the value of the arts in our culture. As more than one respondent pointed out, however, people are attracted to and patronize the arts, but of a different kind—namely, popular music, movies, and television. It would seem that the problem alluded to by the participants belongs to the *fine* arts. Some saw investing in the art and the artists as the key to building audiences—without quality art, they said, audiences will disappear. Because of the concerns raised in these groups, it would be advisable to make room in the learning network for these kinds of theoretical discussions.

- In designing the learning community, it will be important to recognize the existing structures that allow for sharing and coordination within the local arts community. These

resources include an emerging theater alliance, the online magazine and web site Minnesota Playlist (mnplaylist.org), the State Audience Development Initiative (SADI) of the Minnesota State Arts Board, and Springboard for the Arts, which supports the professional development of artists and has played a role in the formation of the theater alliance.

- Although the idea of a learning community focused on audience development was well received by most participants in this study, it is important to realize that not everyone will enthusiastically embrace the concept—especially those who have had disappointing conference and workshop experiences and smaller organizations that are less concerned about audience development.

- There was a noticeable difference in perspective between “career” audience development professionals, typically from large and WEA organizations, and respondents more closely involved with the artistic activities of their organizations, typically small or mid-sized. The former tended to be enthusiastic about the learning network concept and viewed it as an opportunity to refine their skills and professionalize the field with research and best practices. Respondents from mid-sized and small organizations saw the network as an opportunity to share successes and failures with peers, figure out how to use new media, and address the issue of how the arts are valued in our culture. The potential exists, then, for the learning network to meet some professional development needs of participants as well as audience development needs of the organizations they represent.