

Filling the Empty Seats First

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Filling the Empty Seats First – Part 1:

Its 7:59om at a one-hundred-seat venue and a show is about to begin.

Seventy-five seats have been sold since the on-sale date. The first tickets were sold to buyers who were eagerly waiting for the event to happen. As time went on more tickets were sold, but the relative enthusiasm of the buyers tended to wane as the sales campaign unfolded. Finally, in the days and hours before the event, a few stragglers tipped into the ticket-buying category and shortly before curtain time, the seventy-fifth buyer walked up to the box office.

Who's the most important customer?

Tradition would suggest that the first thirty or forty buyers — the subscribers, members and loyal patrons who responded first — are the most important. They're on the most responsive lists, they come to a lot of events, they have the closest relationships with the organization, they're more likely to give money, they have more in common socially with the people who run the organization and their motivations are well understood by the managers and marketers who craft the sales messages. Who wouldn't value them? We love them! Customer number one is customer number one for a reason and the rest follow according to their relative avidity.

Buyers forty-one through sixty-five are a little tougher. They're more expensive to reach, they're less committed, they're less passionate about the art form and they may not show up again until next year. They're vitally important to the bottom line but they're an unpleasant necessity. Life would be so much easier if we didn't have to worry about the vagaries and expense of single-ticket-buying audiences.

And sixty-six to seventy-five? Who the hell knows? They're late, they're fickle, they're unreliable, they're hard to find, they respond mostly to incentives or discount offers and they have a take-it-or-leave-it attitude that's almost insulting. They may help us with our goals, but they're a pain in the ass and they're not really our people anyway. And besides, we may never see them again. So who's most important to you?

I loaded these last few paragraphs with a bias that reflects some deep-seated attitudes in our industry. We tend to know and care the most about the people who know and care the most about us; and conversely, we know and care the least about the people who know and care the least about us. It's human nature. And it makes sense that such an attitude would shape our priorities. After all, why invest too much time in audiences that don't share our passions and preferences? Why bother with people who don't even have the decency to behave like proper arts patrons?

But if I were to pick the most important customers in this example it would be a tossup between numbers seventy-five and seventy-six — the last one to purchase a seat and the one who came closest to filling the next seat but for some reason didn't make it. The rest are important — there's no doubt about that — but they represent the past and the present; we already know how to talk to them. Seventy-five and seventy-six, on the other hand, define the difference between old and new audiences and they have more to teach us than anyone who's ever walked through our doors.

Personally, I'm curious to know what made seventy-five get off the couch and drive down to the venue. He almost didn't make it. I can't help wondering what *moved* him to get here in time. We have twenty-five empty seats and if we can learn what motivated this guy, we should be able to use that information to persuade more people like him to come to our events. I wonder if there's something we should know about him that would make it easier for us to persuade him to buy earlier or come more often.

And my heart goes out to number seventy-six who thought she might come but wound up somewhere else. Where is she tonight? What did she decide to do instead? Why didn't she come to our venue to see our show? What was it about what we said to number seventy-five that got him in the door but failed to capture seventy-six? Could we have said something different that was slightly more compelling — something that would have tipped her into the

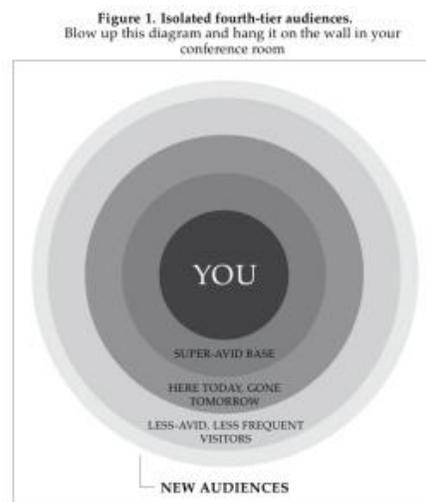
ticket-buying category, too? What should we know about her that would make our messages more persuasive?

No matter what size the venue or how popular the show, the unsold seat next to the last seat sold has somebody's name on it. And the only way to fill that seat is to make whoever isn't sitting there a priority.

We can talk endlessly about new audiences while continuing to put all of our energy into making customer number one happy. But as far as I'm concerned, the key to new audiences lies in making the customers who can't decide where to go as important as the ones who wouldn't dream of being anywhere else.

Filling the Empty Seats First – Part 2

We've talked about the last seat sold, the empty seat next to it, and how important it is to know what the person who didn't show up and the one who did show up have in common. We in the arts talk a lot about new audiences, but we seldom take time to focus on exactly who these people are, what they're looking for or why any of them might want to buy what we're trying to sell. And at the same time we complain bitterly about churn – the tendency among contemporary audiences to sample our wares without becoming regular or dependable customers. Having built our institutions on audiences of loyal, stable, committed patrons, we tend to view churn as a problem that needs to be overcome and we're reluctant to accept the fact that churn and new audiences are essentially the same thing.



I used this diagram in [my book](#) to describe the place where churn and new audiences meet. The inner circle is the arts organization, of course, and everyone professionally associated with it. The first ring is the core support system of members, donors, subscribers and loyal patrons. The second ring is the somewhat less avid, but nonetheless vital population of regular patrons. And the third is the fickle, least avid, least committed audience of frustrating churners. So far, it's a picture of the audience segments I described in my last post.

But the ring I'm most interested in is the outermost ring – the thin, light gray ring just beyond the third that identifies the relationship between old and new audiences. The folks who occupy this adjacent space are more likely than others to give us a try, but for one reason or another they haven't yet stepped across the boundary to become part of the active third ring. Nothing, as far as I'm concerned, is more important than understanding how to motivate people to cross that line.

I chose to illustrate new audiences this way for four reasons:

1. It is imperative that we begin thinking about audiences in terms of *relative avidity* – the farther you move from the center, the less avid the audience's interest in the product. New audiences who inhabit the fourth ring are even less avid than our third ring churners, but compared to the rest of humanity, they're still more likely to participate. That places them in a very specific position relative to our existing communities of customers.
2. The closeness of new audiences tells us exactly where to look for them. A lot of arts professionals dream of ideal but as yet untapped new audiences that look and act just like our super-avid base – but who exist in some mysterious realm that we haven't yet figured out how to contact. Realistic marketers, meanwhile, know that new audiences lie just beyond the ragged, chaotic fringes of our universe of tepid dabblers.
3. Everything we need to know about motivating the fourth ring, we can learn from the third ring. Those who occupy the churn zone have the most in common with those who lie just beyond its boundaries so the more we know about churners and the more actively we use that knowledge to persuade new audiences, the more newcomers we're likely to pull into the fold.
4. Our job as arts professionals is to persuade everyone within our four-ring universe to move toward the center. If we direct our persuasive energies to the outermost ring, it will

naturally influence the inner three rings and draw everyone within our sphere of influence closer. But if we apply our persuasive energies only to the first two rings, which is what we do now, the third and fourth rings will remain uncommitted and elusive.

The lesson in all of this is that we have to love the churn. We have to create as much of it as we can, we have to learn everything it can teach us, we have to use what we learn to forge stronger bonds with uncommitted churners, and we have to apply what we learn to un-persuaded outsiders so we can lure more of them into the zone.

Or to put it in community engagement terms, we have to know and love the folks in – and just beyond – the churn zone as well as we know and love the folks in the super-avid base. Then we have to relate to them in a manner that's as personal, relevant and meaningful as the way we've been relating to avid arts lovers for the last fifty years.

I know it's counterintuitive. No serious arts professional wants to believe that our future is dependent on investing in people who don't currently care all that much about what we do, but it is. Our job now is to convince them we're worth caring about – and then give them a damned good reason to continue caring once they've passed through our doors.

Filling the Empty Seats First – Part III

In [Part I](#) we talked about the empty seat next to the last seat sold and how important it is to understand who isn't sitting there.

In [Part II](#) we talked about the difference between super avid core audiences, less avid/quasi-regular patrons, and the uncommitted outer fringes of our communities of customers. Then we talked about the even less avid new audiences that lie just beyond that churning outer ring. Today we're going to talk about bridges that help us straddle the divide that separates our new audiences from current audiences.

But first a story.

I once was hired by an arts organization that, together with a major funder, came up with a plan to increase weekday participation among seniors by 25%. It was an easy objective to achieve,

but the planners had laid out a tactical approach that made it impossible. “We want you to go out and talk to senior centers, retirement homes and senior living communities,” they said, as if these targets were juicy orbs of low-hanging fruit that no one had thought to pick.

I’d been down this road before so I knew there were many, more sophisticated sellers of weekday leisure activity (such as package tour operators) who had long ago claimed that territory, and that even the most talented, well-compensated, full-time salesperson would find it maddeningly complex, time-consuming and ultimately counterproductive. (Believe it or not, seniors aren’t sitting around waiting for some earnest young arts promoter to hand them something interesting to do).

Meanwhile, I watched as commercial tour coaches rolled up to the venue every week depositing hundreds of seniors onto the organization’s doorstep. When I inquired about the relationships the organization maintained with these companies, I discovered that the gal who listened to the messages on the group sales line kept her contacts in an index card file* that wasn’t part of the organization’s patron database. All the tour business that came to this venue, as it turned out, was passive, and the untapped opportunities for growth in the package travel market were like juicy orbs of low-hanging fruit that nobody had thought to pick.

This story illustrates perfectly how the arts tend to dream about undiscovered imaginary audiences while blithely ignoring some of the more mundane but nonetheless real audiences that lie just beyond their comfort zones. The tour operators in this case were bridges that spanned the divide between the organization’s least important actual customers (those relegated to the index card file) and the even remoter audiences who booked their tours. Here are a few similar bridges that we tend to ignore out of deference to our nearest and dearest – albeit diminishing – core audiences:

First Timers – Any customer who walks through the door for the first time represents an extraordinary opportunity to learn what motivated them to cross the old audience/new audience threshold. The more an organization can learn about what moves someone to cross that line, the easier it will be to motivate others to cross it as well, which in my mind places these venturesome pioneers at the center of our organizational priorities.

Resellers – There’s a whole world of businesses that will happily sell our tickets to their remote or proprietary audiences for a financial incentive. Commercial attractions like theme parks employ vast networks of third-party resellers while nonprofit arts organizations tend to eschew dealing with third parties who expect a cut of the take. At some point, though, we may need to reconsider the relative merits of netting 80% on a ticket sold to a new audience member by someone else vs. 0% on an empty seat.

Partners – I once partnered with a local theme restaurant that had a huge share of the student travel market. They wanted to offer dinner packages that included the Broadway show I was working on and I wanted to reach the student travel market. Together we moved about 8,000 packages. The scale in this case was large, but the model works on any level where two compatible entities share an interest in bringing people to the same destination.

Volume Buyers – If you’re still running one of those pathetic, low-level, one-size-fits-all “group” sales operations, it’s time to wake up and smell the 21st century. Individuals who buy in bulk on behalf of others are among the most important bridges any arts organization can have to new audiences. They include B-to-B buyers such as meeting and event planners, tour operators, charities, corporations, businesses, affinity group managers, resellers and destination partners, plus a broad range of diverse B-to-C buyers who purchase in bulk for a multitude of personal, avocational and professional reasons. If you’re keeping these folks in an index card box or some organizational equivalent, it’s time for a massive reorganization of priorities.

Sales Staff – Smart arts organizations are starting to hire executive sales staffers who oversee a broad range of inside and outside sales activities and who forge valuable, productive, bottom-line oriented community relationships. Sales has numerous benefits, but the principal idea here is that sales people, because they engage with the outside world, bring valuable insights back into organizations that have become too self-centered and insular.

Online Discounters – Daily deal and deep discount liquidators seem like a great ways to fill up the spaces that can’t be sold to real customers, but the attitude that allows us to think in terms of real customers and cheap infill is completely counterproductive. In reality, these companies are indispensable generators of the churn we need to solidify relationships with the future audiences – that is if we’re smart enough to manage the churn.

There are more, but I may have to save those for a follow-up post. The important thing is that these bridges all exist in the remote outer fringes of our artsy universe and they provide extremely useful opportunities to pull new audiences into the fold. If we're serious about growing audiences, it's time to respect the bridges we have, repair the bridges that we've been neglecting and build new bridges where new audiences tell us they're looking for ways to cross the divide.

*Index card files were little boxes with 3" x 5" lined cards and tabbed dividers that people used in the olden days to store and organize data.

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