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The normal approach

Customer-centred strategies can serve the core mission of the arts, if we are willing to challenge our assumptions

As the world's economies begin, ever so slowly, to turn the corner back to growth, the future remains uncertain for arts and cultural leaders. Will government support, individual donations, and audience spending return to their prior levels? What place will the not-for-profit arts hold in people's lives in this new environment? As this next chapter unfolds, a recurring challenge for our field will be even more critical: how to sustain relevance and drive participation for the traditional not-for-profit arts in our communities.

My organisation, National Arts Strategies, works with hundreds of arts executives, staff, and board members each year in the US through our professional development and leadership programmes. Most of the conversations about expanding or diversifying audiences that we hear focus on marketing solutions. Much of the related funding in our field does as well. The challenge of relevance is seen as one of educating the public, getting the word out more effectively, and tapping new social media technologies. In other words, the recommended strategies are 'supply led'.

Even the most effective communications strategies can only carry you part of the way to new audiences, and in our experience, many professionals are far too optimistic about the effects of these activities. Marketing activities can help you move from your realised audience – those you serve today – to your potential audience – all those who would be interested in your offering if certain barriers (awareness, pricing, familiarity with programming) were overcome. This growth can be enough to sustain an organisation. However, this potential audience is commonly far smaller and much less diverse than the audience that organisations desire in order to achieve their missions and generate sufficient financial support.

In our experience, organisations that want to reach a *desired* audience often require fundamental innovation in programming and the experiences created for audiences. This innovation requires leaders to focus on the desired customer and work backward to the right artistic work, venue, timing, pricing, and the myriad other decisions that make up the audience experience. There are excellent processes and a world of literature to help leaders manage the trade-offs and challenges in customer-centred design, and we teach

some of these techniques. What is most interesting in our work is why this approach is so rarely embraced in the arts.

Professor David Owens at Vanderbilt University Owen School of Management, a leading teacher on innovation in organisations, identifies professional norms as a key source of constraints on innovation. Over time, these implicit standards of behaviour in a sector become so ingrained in a profession that they are no longer questioned, even as the environment in which they developed changes. In our field, talk of 'following the customer' almost immediately brings the accusation of pandering. It is a norm that holds many organisations in stasis, suffering a slow fading away while staying faithful to their current approaches.

Today's audiences seek out the essential meaning of an artistic experience across disciplines, sectors, and industries. Through their eclectic choices they define many of the traditional differences between art and entertainment as superficial, and others as hindrances to the core experience. If we look honestly at the experiences these consumers seek – intellectual challenge, emotional truth, social connection, a new perspective – we see the same core promise that we deliver in the traditional arts. This commonality is often lost beneath the surface trappings of the art form, and at times even actively obscured as we promote the differences rather than the similarities.

The question is not whether one can listen to the customer and still advance the art; it is how one can do so effectively. To focus on the customer and allow the customer to lead you into novel solutions, without losing the essential meaning of the art form, a leader must ask what is core to the art form and what is simply an acquired norm in how that art form is either developed or presented. It is easy to conflate these two, in the same way that a mission and a specific strategy for reaching that mission can become conflated. In both cases an organisation creates artificial limits for itself.

The competitive environment we face in the arts today makes it even more difficult to evaluate objectively our norms about the 'true' art experience. The worlds of the not-for-profit arts, for-profit entertainment, and community-driven content are converging as audiences find many of the same benefits in each of these experiences. As these once separate areas of activity overlap, competition for time, attention, and financial support is intensifying. This competition creates even greater incentive to reify the current forms and small differences between these experiences. The contrast supports group identity, and it underpins the special status granted to the not-for-profit arts in society.

It is essential that we challenge the norms and assumptions in our field to give ourselves the greatest

space for creativity; however I do not propose that there is one right answer for all arts and cultural organisations. National Arts Strategies supports a diverse cultural sector because we believe healthy communities need the contributions of a broad mix of organisations with a broad mix of missions. Some organisations will choose to focus first on the artist, acting as amplifiers for the art and helping capture the largest audience possible for the work. Other organisations may take on the role of conserving traditional art experiences for traditional arts patrons. There is an equally important, and very much underserved, role for organisations that will rein-

vent the traditional arts experience for our times. We need to encourage organisations that identify the essence of the art form and the artistic experience; engage the changes in demographics, technology, and values in our communities; and achieve the core purpose of the artistic experience in new forms.

National Arts Strategies is a professional development service for the US arts sector. Jim Rosenberg's past work includes leading product development, marketing, and strategy projects in the for-profit and not-for-profit sectors.

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