

Time for a change of scenery

Diane Ragsdale recommends five steps to embracing culture change ...

We are in the throes of a culture change that has been evolving over the past two decades – largely as a result of demographic shifts, globalisation and technology – which is transforming the way people create, consume, commune and communicate. How can arts organisations adapt to this culture change? Here are five ideas:

Go cellular

Rick Warren is head of a highly successful mega-church whose membership is comprised of thousands of cells – small groups formed around shared hobbies and interests that function as social networks, fuelling friendships between church members. The cells are formed and cultivated by thousands of volunteers. In a 2005 *New Yorker* article on Warren called *The Cellular Church*, Malcolm Gladwell notes that church members who are in cells are more likely to show up at church on Sunday, stay a member of the church longer, and give more money.¹ In other words, the social connections that people form as an aspect of going to church compel them to attend and donate. To attract new audiences, arts organisations may need to foster small-group, socially driven arts participation.

Sample and share

While creating high-definition movie broadcasts like those from the Metropolitan Opera may be inappropriate or out of reach for most organisations, creating mediated experiences to catalyze, expand and deepen relationships

with audiences is not. If the premise of Chris Anderson's *The Long Tail* is true – that the future of culture and commerce lies not in creating blockbusters but in creating and mining niche markets – then organisations that do distinctive programming might be amazed at how many people around the world would pay to download their work – if it were available, free to sample, affordable to purchase, and easy to share with others.²

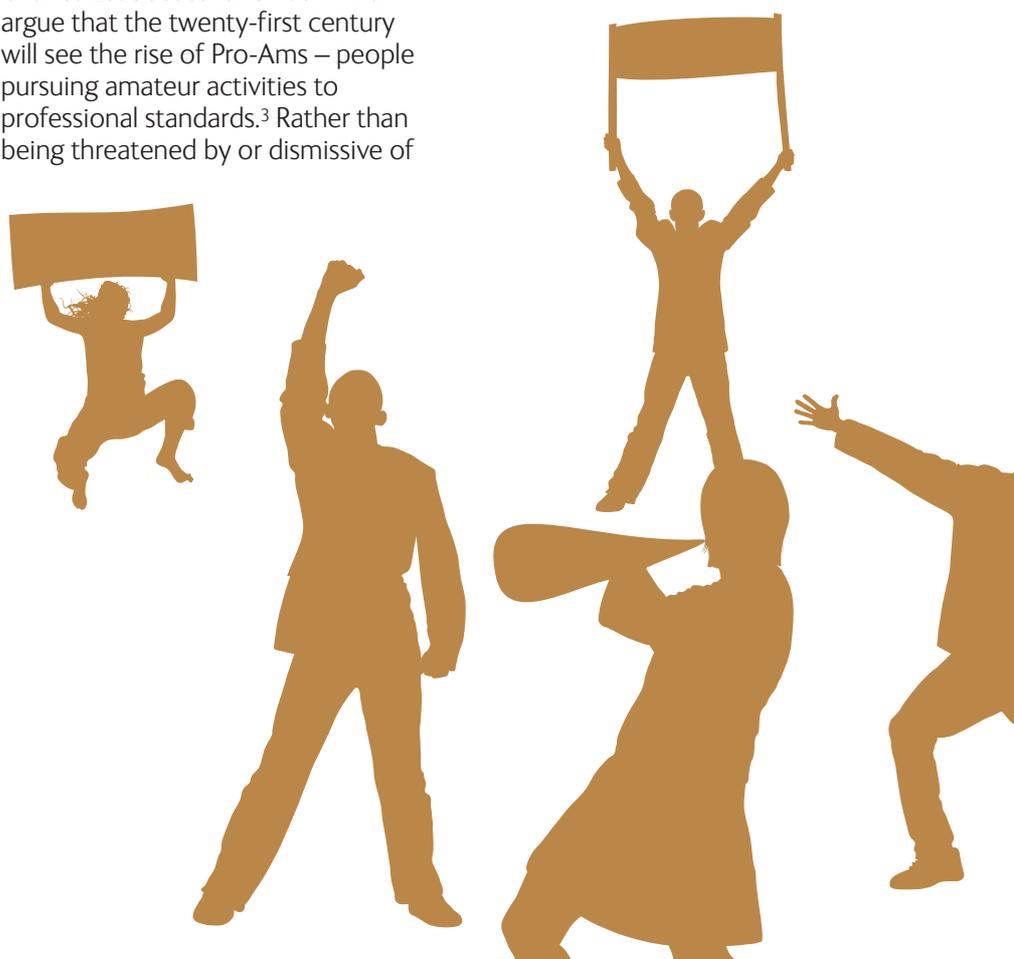
Embrace the Pro-Am revolution

In their 2004 pamphlet *Pro-Am Revolution: How Enthusiasts Are Changing Our Economy and Society*, Charles Leadbeater and Paul Miller argue that the twenty-first century will see the rise of Pro-Ams – people pursuing amateur activities to professional standards.³ Rather than being threatened by or dismissive of

Pro-Am artists and critics, arts organisations may do well to find a way to acknowledge and encourage them: for instance, ask them to host talkbacks, highlight their work on a website, involve them in the curatorial process, or invite them to write patron reviews posted as blogs.

Be arts concierges and filter

Consumers increasingly rely on recommender sites to narrow their choices and expect retailers to understand their preferences and market to them accordingly. Arts organisations need to move beyond transactional experiences and become arts concierges – trusted



friends who help patrons make decisions about what to see. Much as Amazon uses collaborative filters to make recommendations and the online dating service Eharmony uses surveys to match people, arts organisations could collect data on patrons and then help them make more informed decisions.

Aggregate supply and demand

In 1992 sociologist Richard Peterson coined the term Cultural Omnivore to describe the tendency of Baby Boomers and others to develop tastes for everything: high art and pop culture and everything in between.⁴ We may have a generation of Cultural Omnivores, but we've made it difficult for them to feast because we've created silos between non-commercial and commercial entertainment, and between the disciplines of music, theatre, dance, opera and the visual arts. In the minds of the consumer, it's all culture. By maintaining our 'separate and better than others' status the fine arts appear to be losing their spot at the banquet. Imagine scaling the 'arts concierge' idea above for an entire city. What if all the cultural products in a city were accessible through a single website and one could sign up to receive personal arts and culture recommendations via e-mail? In addition to making recommendations, the site could allow residents and tourists to create horizontal subscriptions, bundling artistic experiences across the product lines of the various non-profit and commercial arts and culture organisations: a 'Masterworks package', an 'Avant-Garde package', a 'Family package'. By bundling horizontally, one play in one season, or one exhibit in one museum, could appear on several niche packages. Imagine a demand-based pricing model like Priceline and being one click away from buying a ticket. Imagine purchasing a ticket to a play on such a site and then automatically receiving an interview on public radio

with the playwright as a podcast. Imagine purchasing a particular CD on Amazon and then being alerted automatically when a piece on that CD was going to be played by your local orchestra. In other words, imagine a Customised Cultural Omnivore Subscription. ■

1. **Malcolm Gladwell**, 'The Cellular Church', *The New Yorker* (September 12, 2005): 60–67.
2. **Chris Anderson**, *The Long Tail* (New York: Hyperion, 2006).
3. **Charles Leadbeater and Paul Miller**, "The Pro-Am Revolution", *Demos* (www.demos.co.uk/publications/proameconomy, November 24, 2004)
4. **Richard A. Peterson and Albert Simkus**, 'How Musical Tastes Mark Occupational Status Groups,' *Cultivating Differences; Symbolic Boundaries and the Making of Inequality*, edited by Michele Lamont and Marcel Fournier (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).



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