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Arts Benchmarks, Barriers and New Paradigms, Oh My!

Posted on February 9, 2015 by Ann Marie Miller, ArtPride



Lately my inbox has been flooded with reports and compelling articles related to the current and future state of the non-profit arts industry. Everyone struggles with making time to read and prioritizing what is most meaningful with the hope that content is practical and applicable to life.



This blog is intended to entice you to dig a bit more deeply into recent research and opinions on what I can only term as “shifting paradigms” in the arts field. The links contain the details. I promise not to cite too many stats that so often provoke eye rolls and lurches for the nearest caffeine in sight.

A big water cooler conversation, for those arts groups that actually have water coolers, centers around the January report released by the National Endowment for the Arts, *When Going Gets Tough: Barriers and Motivations Affecting Arts Attendance*. A recent article by Createquity summarizes the report nicely by proclaiming that one size fits all does not fit the “arts.”

Here the high notes are some intriguing data snapshots. Attending performances of opera, ballet, nonmusical plays, classical music, jazz and visiting museums and galleries are considered “benchmark arts activities,” and attendance decreased by nearly 8 percent since 1992. “Interested non-attendees” (13 percent of survey respondents) are those who have shown interest during a 12-month period but did not follow through by attending one of the benchmark arts activities that excluded film, literary arts and remote and home-based participation (more on that later).

Barriers to attendance include lack of time (nearly 50 percent), difficulty getting to an event (37 percent), no one to go with (22 percent) and cost (40 percent). Having just paid \$9 in user fees for half-priced tickets accessible because I am a “member” of that arts organization, it’s clear that arts institutions are struggling with creative ways to keep ticket prices affordable and yet another reason why public arts support and private philanthropy are so vital to the nonprofit arts.



On a positive note, socializing with family and friends is the most common motivator for arts attendance, and exhibit-goers are most often motivated by a desire to learn new things. One of the most interesting findings is that 79 percent of first-born Hispanic immigrants saw performances and exhibitions as opportunities to celebrate cultural heritage in stark contrast to only 4.4 percent of US born non-Hispanic whites — a statistic not to be ignored as New Jersey’s Hispanic population grows.

At the same time the NEA report hit, I came across an article in *The Atlantic* by William Deresiewicz with the intriguing title, *The Death of the Artist — and the Birth of the Creative Entrepreneur*. After reading the Createquity blog and skimming through the NEA report, it felt like worlds were colliding (in a good way).



Mr. Deresiewicz talks about the historical evolution of artist from artisan to creative entrepreneur, how bureaucracy and academia have provided the training and proving grounds for professionalizing artists, and how the democratization of creativity (in part because of new technology) has led to an environment not only where everyone may think of themselves as “creative,” but where great value is now placed on

creative experiences, producing them, and the lifestyle and process of creator/producers. You don't have to think hard to see the multitude of examples in pop culture that surface daily.

Okay, what does this all mean and is it really as heady as it sounds? As I flip back to my email while writing this (because of my limited attention span), two scenarios appear as testimonials to what was just referenced.

One example is an email from the Community Word Project in Brooklyn where children in underserved communities are inspired to read, interpret and respond to their world and to become active citizens through collaborative arts residencies. The other is an email from a young woman who is seeking partners to help her develop an Art4Activism project that will offer Rutgers students an opportunity to innovatively advocate for world change through creative expression.

It's a little bit Shark Tank and a little bit American Idol, but the goals of building community, awareness of societal challenges, and inspiring the use of creative talent, are loftier. Both are different ways of art making that would not be captured in the NEA report but are worthy in and of themselves and increasingly the playing field for "creative entrepreneurs."

Suddenly I'm back to the NEA report, the Creative Entrepreneur article, and yet one more article citing a new report by the William Penn Foundation that references shifting paradigms in Philadelphia's cultural sector. It's clear to me that the arts are alive, it's the definition of art and art making that is evolving — something that everyone in the nonprofit arts world is witnessing firsthand.

Institutions that must deal with facility maintenance and patron-service-related expenses will continue to creatively address the changing demographics and marketplaces. Many already function as community centers and educational resources that provide services ranging from after-care for school-age children through arts activities, to partners in fundraising for human service needs like food banks and disaster relief. The old model of "high art temple" is vanishing rapidly.



How nonprofit arts groups deal with online enticements that offer makers quick and easy ways to learn crafts and skills like calligraphy and drawing remains to be seen.

For a unique and creative example of how a New Jersey arts group is facing these challenges, take a peek at Two River Theatre Company's roll out of their new production of *Guadalupe in the Guest Room*, a world premiere play by Tony Meneces, where "audience extras" include painting sugar skull valentines with a local artist and a workshop that deals with life-changing events like the one that is the plot's focal point.

Do you know another great example of arts groups successfully meeting the audience participation challenges described here, please share them in the comments section.

Ann Marie Miller, who has been ArtPride's Executive Director since 1995, was recently named the art advocacy organization's new Director of Public Policy. Miller is a regular contributor of the Dodge Blog. See more at: <http://blog.grdodge.org/2015/02/09/arts-benchmarks-barriers-and-new-paradigms-oh-my/#sthash.GU1o8efl.dpuf>