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The Anxiety of Age

By Joe Kluger

In conversations with arts executives, I often hear two, seemingly contradictory, beliefs about the likely effects of the aging U.S. population on future arts attendance:

Belief #1 is that audiences are getting older and unless something is done about it, arts organizations will be in serious trouble.

Belief #2 is that arts audiences have always been old, as these types of programs are more likely to attract individuals with more leisure time and disposable income.

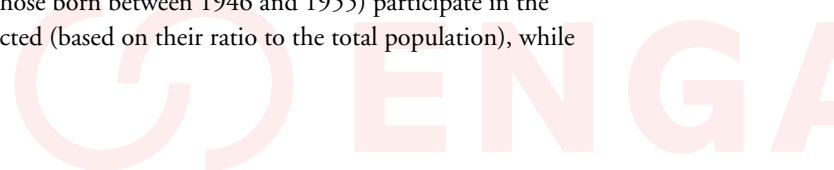
Sorting out the facts is not easy, because much of what is reported comes from different data that is not consistent over long periods of time. Thanks to the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), however, we do have studies that have charted the ages and participation rates of arts attendees over the last 25 years. They document trends for a wide range of art forms, including museums, opera, classical music, musicals, theater, ballet, and jazz.

Here is what we can learn from the NEA and selected other studies:

Arts patrons are indeed aging, both in absolute terms and relative to the general population. The median age of attendees of arts events rose from 38 in 1965 to 43 in 1997. Although the median age of the general population has also been rising, the age of attendees at arts events has been rising at a faster rate.

There has been, to varying degrees by art form, an increase over time in the proportion of attendance by older people. For example, between 1982 and 1997, those over 60 years of age rose from 15.6% to 30.3% of the classical music audience, while those under 30 years of age fell from 26.9% to 13.2% of that audience.

Early-baby boomer cohorts (those born between 1946 and 1955) participate in the arts at a higher rate than expected (based on their ratio to the total population), while



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late-baby boomers (born 1956-65) participate less frequently. Members of neither group appear to be increasing their participation in the arts as they age, however, which represents a potential marketing challenge for arts organizations.

This arts research is emerging as the nation's elderly population – those 65 and older – is projected to grow to 81 million, or 19% of the total, in 2050, up from 37 million, or 12%, in 2005. With a projected increase in average life expectancy between 2005 and 2050 of roughly seven years, the aging of arts attendees may represent more of a marketing opportunity than a threat for arts groups.

A change in demographics that increases the target age market for the arts does not guarantee a corresponding increase in arts participation. To reverse the inexorable decline in arts participation requires a deep understanding of the root causes and the development of effective strategies to counteract them. To their credit, arts groups, with support from their funders, are experimenting with a variety of innovative audience development strategies, including adapting arts programming to attract younger audiences, segmenting arts offerings to appeal to varied attendee interests, participation through collaborative research and marketing initiatives among arts groups, and many others.

We have asked three knowledgeable and seasoned executives to share their views on what arts groups should do to meet their short-term and long-term attendance challenges.

Ed Cambron

Vice President of Marketing and Communications

The Philadelphia Orchestra

Yes, audiences are getting older. But that doesn't mean we can continue to use the same old strategies to engage them. The packaging and subscription model we used for yesterday's older audiences no longer works for today's, and most certainly will not work for tomorrow's. One of the traps that we often fall into when discussing audiences is applying a single definition to each demographic. Some older audiences may have had classical music as part of their childhood and carried it forward as a core part of their arts consumption, but that doesn't mean they all love Carter as much as Beethoven. Some do; some don't. Some may not even be knowledgeable enough to tell you what they like, or maybe for them it's more about the experience. Any box office professional will tell you that audiences, regardless of their age, don't all act the same. This basic concept, that audiences are different within their demographic, has been a driving force in our research plan and subsequent marketing strategies in Philadelphia.

With audiences more fragmented than ever and having more options for both what they hear and where they hear it, a deep understanding of their real experience expectations is critical.

Armed with this understanding, we have the opportunity to increase frequency of attendance among our diverse base of older audiences, while also enticing young folks along the way. At The Philadelphia Orchestra, we learned through intensive research that audiences do in fact cluster into four discreet typologies, surprisingly equal in size.

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AGE

Without “dumbing down” one bit (in fact I’d call it “smarter up”), we have packaged concert experiences that better align with the musical and experiential appetite of these key segments:

Some want concerts “straight up,” with a mix of the new and the old.

Some expect just the warhorses.

Some desire concerts with spoken introductions and/or visual stimulation.

Some seek a robust social experience.

By simply meeting them where they are on their own musical journeys, through intelligent packaging and clear communication, we believe audiences, young and old, will become more engaged and attend more frequently.

Matt Lehrman

Executive Director, Alliance for Audience & ShowUp.com, Phoenix, AZ

You get the audience you deserve, so there’s good reason to feel anxious.

Too many arts organizations focus on how to spend enough advertising money to attract (i.e. rent) audiences for next week’s performance. Of course there’s never enough marketing money to fill the last 15% to 25% of seats that go unsold in a typical year, and longer-term solutions are even more expensive. Whose job is it to cultivate the next generation of arts attendees?

Let’s admit the ugly truth: advertising isn’t audience development.

Ad buys fuel a frenzy of competition that actually reduces arts organizations to small, separate voices crying “pick me, pick me” in the noisy, crowded, and fiercely competitive marketplace for people’s leisure time and discretionary spending.

When the arts community collaborates on marketing and audience development, we’re a much more powerful force! The benefits of collaboration are to spread the risk of experimentation, preserve resources, heighten visibility, and gather allies. Some examples:

ArtsBoston’s Big List is a master mailing list database compiled from 43 organizations (from large professional companies to small theatre, music, and dance groups), which simplifies mailing list exchanges, saves time, and cuts costs.

Free Night of Theater is Theatre Communications Group’s annual national audience development program to attract new theatre goers and transform them into returning paying customers.

ShowUp.com unites arts and cultural event listings in the Greater Phoenix region within a shared brand and provides an entrepreneurial business platform to sustain the efforts of a coalition of more than 150 organizations.

The purpose of collaboration is not to end competition. Rather, its goal is to address the mutual challenge of audience development in a manner that is effective, affordable, and systematic.

Greg Sandow

Arts Critic, Author, and ArtsJournal blogger

Like so many people we know, my wife and I were addicted to *The Sopranos*, watched it every week, and have watched *Project Runway*, though I also got attached to *Battlestar Galactica* and *Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles*. Both of us think films like *Sweeney Todd* and *No Country for Old Men* are serious art – this was a good year for movies – and I listen to lots of pop music.

But my wife and I have also spent our lives in the arts. So we go back and forth between arts events and popular culture, and we’re not alone in this. Many younger people in the arts audience – and many arts professionals – do the same thing. But younger people outside the arts don’t think that high and pop culture are separated. They’re members of the “nobrow” generation (to borrow the title of John Seabrook’s famous book), and they don’t separate highbrow and lowbrow culture at all. To them, it’s all simply their culture — all of it, in whatever mix-and-match blend they want to create.

And that makes younger people – from an arts point of view – a harder audience to reach. This isn’t because they think arts culture is boring, uncool, or too difficult, but because they demand more from it. I’ve been going to the opera since I was in high school, but the nobrow generation wants to know why it should go. And if it

puts a night at the opera up against *Juno* or *There Will Be Blood*, or any of this year's big Oscar-nominated movies, or against Bjork's latest album, opera will very likely lose. Current popular culture, at its best, is complex and dark, offering (like the world we live in) no easy answers to big or small questions. Compared to that, opera is easy and light, beautiful (in a retro sort of way), but not smart enough, and rarely challenging. Why go? Except, maybe, for the kind of entertainment we get from a delightful old movie.

So should arts organizations simply aim their programming – in full commercial style – at whatever the nobrow audience wants? No, because the nobrow audience is too smart for that, and too skeptical. And what it wants, more than anything else, is to be challenged and surprised. Which leads, in turn, to a surprise for arts organizations. If they want to attract this young audience, they'll have to get smarter. They'll have to make sure that the art they present – and the ways they talk about art in their promotion and marketing – is as textured, dark, and complex as the best of today's movies, pop music, and TV.



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