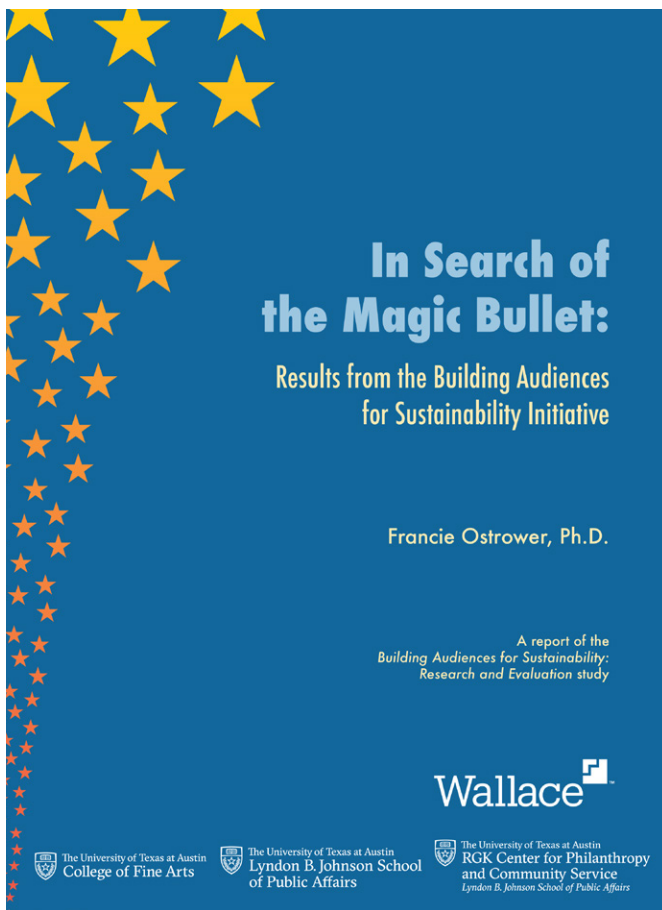


What It Takes to Build Audiences and Sustainability

The Wallace Foundation’s five-year *Building Audiences for Sustainability Initiative* explored how nonprofits arts groups—including four orchestras—could expand audiences and boost revenue. A new report reveals what worked, what was less successful, possible ways forward, and some surprising results.



From 2015 to 2019, the Wallace Foundation conducted the *Building Audiences for Sustainability Initiative*, a major, cross-discipline study of how nonprofit performing arts organizations sought to build their audiences while also increasing revenue. Twenty-five arts groups—including the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra, Los Angeles Philharmonic, New York Philharmonic, Oakland East Bay Symphony, and Seattle Symphony—tested different approaches to building new audiences while keeping their current audiences engaged. Read the complete report on the Wallace initiative, by Francie Ostrower, at <https://wallacefoundation.org/report/search-magic-bullet-results-building-audiences-sustainability-initiative-results-building>.

Here’s a summary of key discoveries of the initiative, courtesy of the Wallace Foundation.

In Search of the Magic Bullet: Results from the Building Audiences for Sustainability Initiative

There is no magic bullet for arts organizations looking to build their audiences while also increasing revenue. While it’s possible to engage both new and current audiences using a variety of strategies, successful audience building may not always happen on the organization’s desired terms. It also might not bring the hoped-for financial gains, at least not right away.

That’s one of several key learnings from the nonprofit performing arts organizations who participated in Wallace’s *Building Audiences for Sustainability* (BAS) initiative from 2015 to 2019. The 25 organizations tested different approaches to build new audiences while keeping their current audiences engaged. Some focused on age groups, such as millennials or Gen-X; others looked at location and how they interacted with their community. Some worked to attract a more racially or ethnically diverse audience. A few sought to build audiences for new or less familiar works.

What Worked?

To find out which approaches worked and which were less successful, researchers from the University of Texas at Austin drew on extensive interviews with BAS organizations’ leadership and staff. They also looked at ticketing data and audience surveys for a subset of 15 BAS organizations. Notably, most of this subset were able to expand their target audience. Increases, however, were often more modest than initially hoped-for gains, and did not result in an overall growth in attendance.

Researchers learned that some audience-building approaches were more effective than others. Many organizations discovered that changing how they communicated about programming with prospective audiences made a difference. In publicizing new work, for example, one organization learned that “world premieres” held little cachet for the audience they sought to reach. Providing audiences with a sense of what to expect from the performance, however, was impactful.

Successful audience-building strategies meet audiences where they are.

Building Arts Audiences? Take the Journey

How can arts organizations engage new audiences while retaining existing ones? And can their efforts to build new audiences contribute to their work, mission, and financial health? Twenty-five large performing arts organizations explored these questions. A team at the University of Texas at Austin studied their efforts. Here's some of what they found:

Four Key Ideas

1. ACCEPT THERE IS NO MAGIC BULLET

Cultivating audiences takes time and resources. It should be seen as a mission-driven investment that may require funding, similar to starting a new program.



2. USE DATA AND TEST ASSUMPTIONS

Engaging audiences requires learning everything you can about them—and about how they perceive your organization. Knowing what a particular audience or community wants can help with programming, marketing, and communications.

3. QUESTION BELIEFS AND OUTDATED PRACTICES

Industry-wide beliefs or traditional practices may not hold true for every organization. Audience-building must therefore be unique to each organization's circumstances.



4. BE THE CHANGE-AND GIVE IT TIME

While building audiences is possible, it might not happen on an organization's desired terms and may not yield immediate results. Organizations who want to change how audiences engage with them must first be open to changing themselves.



Organizations found promising strategies...

- making communications more welcoming with less jargon
 - expanding digital and multimedia communications to meet audiences where they are
 - using video trailers to preview work, especially when it's challenging or experimental
- #### and a couple less promising
- creating "crossover" programming with new genres
 - staging performances off site (i.e., at a bar) to attract mainstage audiences

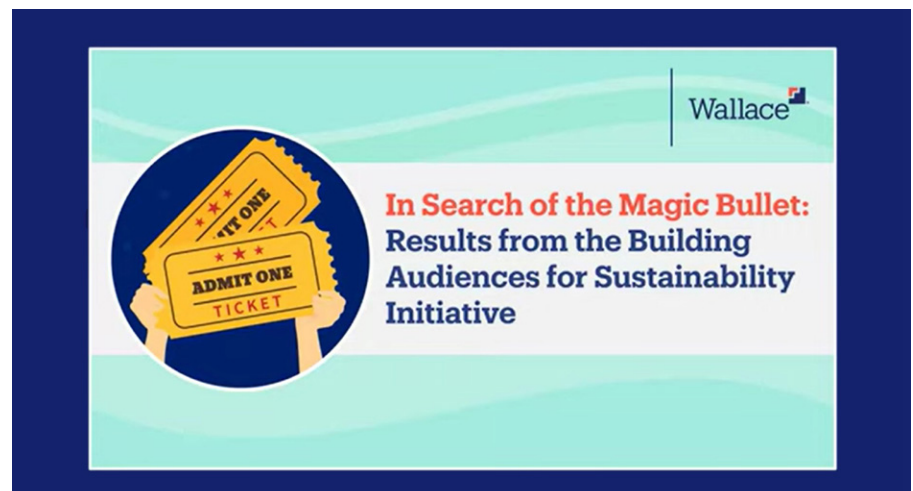
This graphic illustrates key takeaways from *In Search of the Magic Bullet: Results from the Building Audiences for Sustainability Initiative*, by Francie Ostrower, Ph.D., available at www.wallacefoundation.org

With audience building, organizations should determine their goal at the outset.

Changing how program information was delivered to audiences also made a difference: expanding use of digital communications (email, social media, video) to share important and informative content was consistently effective.

What Fell Short?

Other audience-building approaches often did not work as anticipated. For example, the results of "crossover strategies"—when organizations presented different types of programs specifically to attract new audiences with the hope that these audiences would then attend traditional programming—were consistently disappointing. This led many organizations to



On April 11, the Wallace Foundation presented a free webinar, "In Search of the Magic Bullet: Insights from Nonprofit Arts Organizations on Building Audiences and Financial Sustainability," that explore the findings of Wallace's Building Audiences for Sustainability initiative. The webinar was led by Francie Ostrower, principal investigator of Building Audiences for Sustainability and a professor at University of Texas at Austin, joined by leaders who participated in the Building Audiences for Sustainability program for an in-depth look at results of the study. Webinar panelists include Mieko Hatano, executive director, Oakland Symphony; Andrew Jorgensen, general director, Opera Theatre of St. Louis; Cookie Ruiz, executive director, Ballet Austin; Roche Edward Schuller, executive director/CEO, Goodman Theatre; and Bahia Ramos and Bronwyn Bevan of the Wallace Foundation. Check out the webinar and more at <https://wallacefoundation.org/resource/presentation/webinar-search-magic-bullet>.

question the myth of what one interviewee described as the “long, slow escalator,” a long-held theory that audience members slowly progress from a first visit to more frequent attendance to ultimately becoming subscribers and donors.

And some approaches produced mixed results. For example, organizations had varied success using performances at off-site venues to attract new audiences to mainstage productions.

What Are the Implications?

Audience building is hard work. Organizations should determine their goal at the outset. Is it, for example, to expand audiences, even if it involves changing or expanding their programming? Or is the goal to build audiences strictly for what they already do? Each requires a different focus and strategies.

All of the BAS organizations used data and market research to understand what worked and what didn't. The data helped them understand and revise long-held assumptions about their particular audiences. It helped them better connect and communicate with new audiences as well.

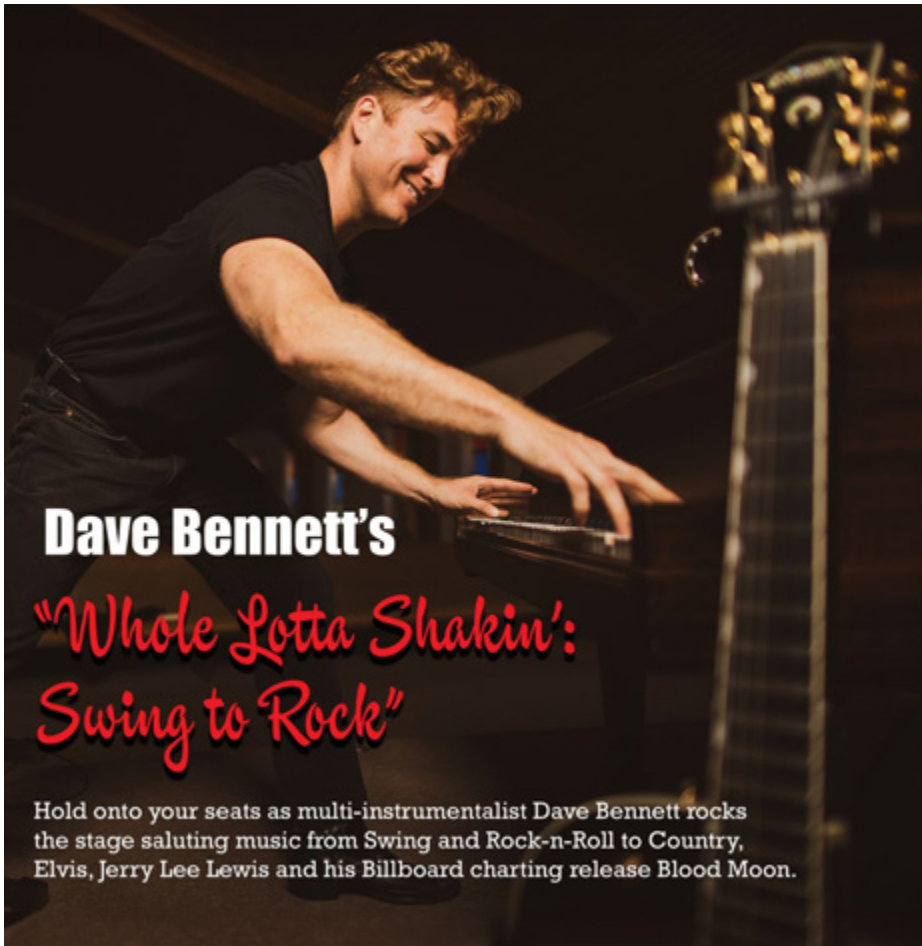
Using data also highlighted the pitfalls of advocating for approaches without first assessing costs and benefits. It steered some organizations away from judging success based on a single effort. And it helped underscore that there may be mission-driven reasons for pursuing a particular audience that might not boost finances and, in fact, might even require additional investment.

The final report explores these and other audience-building approaches that BAS organizations employed, as well as the financial implications of these efforts. Perhaps the most unexpected lesson for participating organizations was that audience building doesn't depend on the audience alone. If arts organizations want to change how they engage with their audiences, they may first need to be open to changing themselves.

Key Takeaways

- Most BAS organizations expanded their target audience, although changes were often more modest than initially hoped-for gains and generally did not increase overall attendance, at least in the short term.

- Unexamined and unfounded assumptions often hindered organizations' ability to connect with audiences they hoped to reach. Using data helped organizations uncover these assumptions.
- Successful audience-building strategies met audiences where they were. For example, using more welcoming and informative communication styles and expanding the use of digital and multimedia platforms usually worked.
- Offering unique programming specifically to attract new audiences, as well as presenting at off-site venues with the hope that these audiences would “crossover” to attend traditional programs were consistently ineffective.
- Over the course of the initiative, organizations saw overall audience gains, coupled with fewer subscribers and a decline in frequency of attendance. This suggests that organizations might need to attract and embrace more infrequent audience members and/or find ways to



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Brandon Patoc



The Seattle Symphony was among the performing arts groups participating in the Wallace Foundation's BAS initiative. The orchestra experimented with different concert programs and styles, including, in photo, a "Sonic Evolution" concert featuring Mike McCready, lead guitarist for Seattle-based grunge band Pearl Jam.

cultivate deeper engagement with audiences.

- Targeted audience building does not necessarily predict growth in earned revenue. Organizations should acknowledge that some audience-building efforts require financial subsidy and serve other important needs that aren't tied to financial health.

If arts organizations want to change how they engage with their audiences, they may first need to be open to changing themselves.

What We Don't Know

- This study was conducted with 25 large and well-established non-profit arts organizations. How do these lessons apply for smaller, less well-established arts organizations?
- The report describes long-term trends that preceded and were often exacerbated by the pandemic. Post pandemic interviews with organizational leaders suggested that the urgency of the pandemic has not yet yielded new solutions to long-term challenges. What does reimagining an institution look like?

Implementation Tips

- Clarify your goal in audience building. Are you trying to engage a specific audience, or expand overall attendance? Are you audience building to bring in additional revenue,

- or to support a particular type of art that might not help your bottom line? Clarity around these questions will help you design more effective audience-building strategies.
- Consider the financial implications of audience-building efforts. Some audience-building initiatives will require financial subsidy, rather than generating earned income to cover costs. Beyond ticket sales, will grants, donations, or other subsidies be required to support your initiative?
- Use data and seek external input to surface unfounded assumptions, and be open to revisiting those assumptions. Organizations can ask for external input from audiences they hope to engage. **S**

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