



Data and Deliberation: How Some Arts Organizations are Using Data to Understand Their Audiences

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A report of the
*Building Audiences for Sustainability:
Research and Evaluation study*

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Data and Deliberation:

How Some Arts Organizations are Using Data to Understand their Audiences

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“THERE HAVE BEEN THINGS THAT WE SUSPECTED to be true that we now know are true. There have been things that we didn’t have the faintest idea were true that now we know are true.” This comment was made by a theater director while reflecting on his organization’s use of data to advance its audience-building efforts. The organization was one of 25 performing arts organizations awarded grants to build audiences as part of The Wallace Foundation’s Building Audiences for Sustainability (BAS) initiative. The organizations’ specific projects differed, but all made extensive use of data collection and market research. Within the initiative, data and market research were emphasized as part of a continuous learning approach that consisted of an iterative process of design, implementation, analysis, and identification of changes needed for improvement. This report, the second publication from our independent evaluation of the initiative, presents interim findings about the organizations’ experiences with this data-based approach.

National statistics show stagnant or declining attendance across many art forms associated with the nonprofit performing arts.¹ While the problem is widely acknowledged, there is less consensus or confidence about how organizations can respond. Can data and market research help? Our findings emphasize that data is not a magic bullet. Engaging with data is a complex and challenging undertaking. Notwithstanding the challenges, however, virtually everyone at the participating

organizations was positive about the initiative’s emphasis on data and market research, and found engaging with data helpful. Engaging with data often prompted organizations to recognize and question assumptions and better understand their external environment. We hope that insights from their experiences will prove useful to others considering ways to engage and expand audiences. We find:

- The use of data appeared most valuable when embedded in a larger deliberative process. Here, data become an input into a broader procedure of reflection and assessment about whether organizational goals are being pursued effectively. Data can then be used to help refine and revise plans.
- Data can yield interesting insights beyond immediate intended purposes. In particular, we repeatedly found cases where engagement with data prompted organizations to become aware of their unexamined assumptions about external constituencies. At a time when arts organizations face challenges of relevance and seek wider connections, such awareness can help correct misperceptions about those they hope to connect with and reduce insularity.
- As noted, engaging with data can be complex – and it can also be costly. Compiling data without a clear purpose can produce an overload of information that

1. *A Decade of Arts Engagement: Findings from the Survey of Public Participation in the Arts, 2002–2012*, NEA Research Report Number 58 (Washington, D.C.: National Endowment for the Arts, 2015), <https://www.arts.gov/sites/default/files/2012-sppa-jan2015-rev.pdf>; and *U.S. Trends in Arts Attendance and Literary Reading: 2002–2017: A First Look at Results from the 2017 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts* (Washington, D.C.: National Endowment for the Arts, 2018), <https://www.arts.gov/sites/default/>

<files/2017-sppapreviewREV-sept2018.pdf>. For a review of the literature on audience building in the nonprofit performing arts, see Francie Ostrower and Thad Calabrese, *Audience Building and Financial Health in the Nonprofit Performing Arts: Current Literature and Unanswered Questions* (Austin, TX: University of Texas, 2019), <https://www.wallace-foundation.org/knowledge-center/Documents/Audience-Building-Financial-Health-Nonprofit-Performing-Arts.pdf>.

exceeds an organization's ability or motivation to process. Poor quality data, or data used inappropriately, can hinder rather than advance progress, and moving from data to actions based on data can be difficult. Staff may be concerned that data will be used to drive programmatic choices in ways they see as inconsistent with mission. And while organizations expressed enthusiasm for taking a data-based approach, they also emphasized that it is very unusual for them to have adequate funding to do so.

- Effectively using data to achieve organizational goals requires that participants be able to frankly acknowledge what data say about what is working and what is not working, in a fruitful rather than punitive fashion.

Our interim findings suggest the importance of considering both the potential benefits and challenges in advance, so that data can be approached in a way that supports organizational needs and goals. The initiative funded all grantees to engage in data collection and market research to support their work. Data collection methods varied, but typically included a mix of focus groups, ticketing database analyses, and post-performance audience surveys. Organizations could use grant funds to engage consultants to carry out data collection and research, and most used external consultants in some capacity. Each organization was also assigned a market research advisor retained by The Wallace Foundation. The University of Texas research team was not involved in the design, conduct, or analysis of the data collection or market research activities undertaken by grantees as part of their Wallace Foundation grants.

Data as Part of a Process

Data appeared to be most appreciated and impactful for participants when embedded in a larger process of deliberation. This process allows organizations to interpret the data and relate them to purposes they value. The importance of going through this type of process is reflected by a contrast one interviewee drew between the institution's past and current practices. Previously, the organization had "reams and reams and reams of data that nobody knew how to read, or nobody would bother to consult." They now collect more data but have a process for using them, characterized as "trying something, testing it, and then either keeping it or discarding it and moving on to something else." According to another interviewee from the organization, they used to "pull out data that supported the point we wanted to make," but now ask questions such as, "Did we test what we thought we were going to test? Were we asking the right question? Just getting used to that idea of really thinking about the questions."

Interviewees from other organizations made similar comments that provide examples of linking data to a broader reflective process. One illustration comes from an organization trying to attract a demographically de-

About the Initiative, Participants, and this Study

In 2015, The Wallace Foundation launched its Building Audiences for Sustainability initiative, awarding close to \$41 million in grants to performing arts organizations to try to engage new audiences while retaining existing ones, and to see whether these audience-building efforts contribute to organizations' financial health. The organizations included theater companies (8), performing arts presenters (6), opera companies (4), symphony orchestras (4), and dance companies (3). Virtually all of the organizations were independently incorporated nonprofit organizations, but a couple were units within larger public entities. Of the 24 for whom the information is available, all had operating expenses in excess of \$1 million, and over half had operating expenses in excess of \$10 million.

BAS grantees focused their audience-building efforts on a "target audience." The majority defined their target audience demographically, usually by age (mostly millennials), some by race/ethnicity, and in a few cases by a combination of the two. Others defined their audience in "psychographic" terms (mostly "adventurousness"), targeted infrequent attendees, or tried to attract audiences to a particular type of work.

After making the 2015 awards, The Wallace Foundation commissioned and funded The University of Texas at Austin to conduct an independent evaluation of the implementation and outcomes of the initiative's audience-building efforts. Our findings for the initiative as a whole, which ended in 2019, will be presented in our final report. The present discussion shares interim findings about participants' experience implementing one key and crosscutting part of the initiative – the use of data and market research. It is based on personal interviews with organizational leaders and staff. We conducted a first round of interviews from late 2015 to 2016, at an early stage of the initiative, with 152 executive and artistic leaders, BAS project managers (usually from marketing departments), finance staff, and board heads. Then, in 2017 to 2018, after grantees had reached or passed the midpoint of their efforts, we conducted a second round of interviews, this time with 67 executive and artistic leaders (a combined position at some organizations, separate positions at others) and project managers. The early interviews provide context, but since our present focus is on experiences with data and market research, most of the material presented here comes from the second round of interviews. Interviewees were assured that the interviews were confidential, were strictly separate from monitoring or reporting to the foundation, and that results of individual interviews would not be shared with The Wallace Foundation.

fined target audience in the community. An interviewee said data have “had an impact because that’s how we’re measuring our success” and explained:

We’re doing all these different things. So, if we put street pole banners in [relevant] communities and then the next show, the show that we do that for, we don’t see movement in the percentage of single-ticket buyers [from that group], that’s where we start with our questions: Was it just the show that they weren’t interested in? Did they get the message and reject it? Or were we not targeted enough? . . . [If] this show was aiming at getting new people here, and I know that the first week, 25 percent of the single-ticket buyers claimed they had never been here before, that’s interesting.

Another organization that was also trying different audience-building activities reviewed data to inform decision-making based on its priorities. The organization’s goal was to build audiences for its art form. One of their efforts involved bringing artists to town prior to opening nights for public discussion panels. Results proved variable and dependent on the name recognition of the artist. Further, “the people who we did draw for these programs who did match the profile of this grant often would attend, and then attend the [production] that the panel was about. And then not come again.” Since their intention was to build an audience for their art form rather than any one production, they scaled back on the panels, and prioritized other activities viewed as more consistent with that goal. One such effort, characterized as “wildly successful,” involved presenting performances at various restaurants and culinary venues, where performances were coupled with a complementary “tasting menu” of food and drink. Interviewees felt these events created a “broader platform” by encouraging attendance at a range of productions rather than just one. Further, they believed that presenting the art form in a fun and engaging atmosphere was helping them overcome negative perceptions of the art form that emerged during focus groups, where participants said they felt that “you have to have expensive jewelry, you have to be a certain kind of person to fit in.” One interviewee said that these events have been successful at building audiences, but they would also consider them “spectacular” regardless of whether they sparked ticket sales in their main theater “because this is a version of our product and mission.”

In another case, an organization started using data for financial planning. An interviewee explained: “That’s the kind of data approach that has been really, really helpful because we can plan for an entire season ahead of time, knowing the outcome.” Specifically, for each program the organization now creates a separate budget “that shows us what kind of revenue we might expect from a certain type of programming. . . . Sometimes, of course, we go for less familiar products that wouldn’t at-

tract as many people. . . . But in those situations, we look for additional funding, for grants to cover the so-called opportunity costs.”

In these examples, data are used to prompt questions, inform decision-making, and help chart subsequent courses of action in relation to the organization’s goals and priorities. The data alone do not dictate a particular course of action, but assume value in relation to a way of thinking about and using the information. For organizations considering a data-based approach, this suggests the importance of clarifying in advance the purpose that the organization is trying to achieve, and what decisions it is trying to make. Establishing a clear purpose for data collection can help focus data collection efforts and ensure that goals will drive the data and not the reverse.

Broader Implications: Uncovering Organizational Assumptions

In addition to confirming or disconfirming specific ideas, engaging with data can yield unanticipated insights. In particular, data sometimes prompted organizations to recognize they were making unexamined and unwarranted assumptions about external constituencies. Engaging with data therefore provided an opportunity to surface and adjust these assumptions. Examples fall into two broad categories. One category consists of examples of organizations using language rooted in their own perspectives rather than those of the individuals they wish to communicate with. The other category relates to organizational assumptions about their target audiences.

Multiple interviewees said they realized their organizations had assumed that their priorities were shared by those outside of their organizations and artistic disciplines. Consequently, they also assumed that language they found meaningful would be meaningful to others. A case in point had to do with organizational perspectives and language related to “premieres.” An interviewee from one organization that prioritizes presentation of new artistic work recalled:

We had always operated under the assumption, perhaps narcissistically in [our] industry, that there was a real cachet about world premiere, OK, or premiere, and that that was something that would be intriguing and attractive to audiences. We found that was completely wrong.

Contrary to the initial assumption, focus group feedback indicated that “newness was not the thing that drew people, so to lead with that is not particularly helpful.” Likewise, one interviewee said they had created separate content on their website to publicize new works, but, consistent with the focus group feedback, interaction with material on the site proved low. Instead, focus groups suggested that audiences were drawn to things they feel a connection to. The organiza-

tion shifted its approach (including discontinuing the website effort just noted), and instead started to ask questions such as, “How can we get more information to audiences earlier, if what they really need is to understand what their potential connection to this work is?”

Another organization also re-thought how it communicated about its work to audiences following an analysis of attendance patterns in their ticketing database. An interviewee explained:

What that database is telling us is like, if they know it’s a comedy, they want to come. If they know it’s a musical, they want to come. If they know it’s a classic, that particular group of people wants to come to that. . . . Hearing things like “world premiere” maybe isn’t that impactful to the average audience member, as a tagline.

In light of what the analysis suggested about what mattered to audiences, the organization revised its brochure “taglines” to identify the production’s type, such as a comedy, a drama, or a musical.

In the second category of examples, engaging with data surfaced unwarranted assumptions about the very groups the organization hoped to engage. For instance:

- One organization offered special performances intended to attract millennials. The organization had assumed that focusing on millennials would also result in a more racially diverse audience “based on how millennials consume and view the world.” The results did not support that assumption. Instead, an interviewee said “our [special performance] audiences actually trended whiter . . . which was very distressing to us.” This led the organization to focus more intentionally on racial and ethnic diversity. The interviewee said they made changes, including “a conscientious effort to engage artists of color” for these special performances, that resulted in a “huge shift” in audience diversity.
- Another organization initially expected millennials to have different programming preferences, so “we thought we would have to have programming geared towards what they, the millennials, like.” They therefore anticipated they would need to present more contemporary pieces to attract this target audience. However, ticket purchasing patterns and audience surveys led them to conclude that millennials “like the same things that everybody else likes,” including new and classic works. The organization therefore focused on other approaches to attract millennials, such as making greater use of social media in marketing efforts.
- For another organization, a starting assumption was that doing “ethnic-specific work” would attract the organization’s intended target audience, but that “you didn’t really have to do work to get that group to continue to engage” – an assumption that proved

incorrect. The organization had mounted one such production which attracted large numbers of target audience members who did not return. Referencing sustainability as a key goal, one interviewee said “the one-off programming . . . was probably, in my opinion, the least successful thing that we’ve done.” The organization therefore explored other approaches, such as presenting more ethnically diverse casting and additional marketing and community engagement efforts. Staff feel that some of these will produce less of an immediate result than the earlier production, but hope they will have a longer-term impact.

A widespread theme in the audience-building literature reviewed in an earlier project report² is that performing arts organizations today face a potential loss of relevance, but fail to recognize the extent of the problem. If that is the case, then it is very important to understand how organizations can become more aware of their external environment. Our interim findings indicate that engaging with data offers one avenue.

These examples illustrate that deliberative engagement with data is not a “one-shot” process but calls for adopting and institutionalizing an ongoing attitude and approach, especially where goals are complex and circumstances can evolve. Data may answer some questions, but as objectives and strategies are refined or changed, new rounds of questions, exploration, and assessment emerge. For organizations considering such an approach, this suggests the importance of ensuring that structures and practices are in place where this process of reflection and assessment can occur on an ongoing basis.

Engaging with Data: Costs and Complexities

While quite positive, interviewees’ comments also point to complexities and challenges of using and engaging with data. The most commonly cited strength of the initiative’s emphasis on data and market research (mentioned by interviewees from 40 percent of organizations) is that the BAS initiative provided funds for an important, but rarely funded activity. An interviewee from one of the smaller organizations in the initiative expressed this perspective, saying:

For an organization of this size . . . we would never, never be able to justify making the resources available in our . . . annual budget. . . . And it’s important. . . . Otherwise, we’re just operating on hunches. Wallace makes it possible for us to really find out what’s going on, why people aren’t coming, why people don’t even know about us, how they might learn about us, what they’re interested in. Without

2. Ostrower and Calabrese, *Audience Building and Financial Health in the Nonprofit Performing Arts*.

Wallace funding and the emphasis on research, we would still be just groping in the dark with this issue.

These comments were not limited to smaller organizations. For instance, an interviewee from an organization with an annual budget in excess of \$10 million feels, “The absolute strength is that it’s often the first thing cut from budgets of arts organizations, and so the very fact that it allowed us to do it is a huge plus for the company.” Thus, comments about the strength of relying on data and market research also point to a perceived significant challenge, namely the costs.

Yet even with funds, and returning to the theme of this paper, data alone cannot be expected to provide a magic bullet to solve complicated questions. When data quality is poor or not appropriate to the questions being asked, it can hamper, rather than further progress. Data that reveal efforts are not achieving hoped-for goals will not necessarily tell you how you can achieve those goals. And while data may suggest that a change needs to be made, considerable efforts and resources may then need to be mustered to actually implement the changes. Additionally, a data-based approach can spur concerns that data will be used to drive programmatic choices in ways that are inconsistent with mission.

Among these organizations, the most commonly mentioned potential weakness of emphasizing data and market research was that it can lie, or mislead, or be weak or imprecise. This was mentioned by interviewees at just over half of the organizations. In some cases, they were referencing challenges they felt had occurred. In other cases, they were pointing to the potential for such challenges. One interviewee felt their data and research was overly focused on understanding their target audience, so they had no group to compare the target with. Others referenced comments people made during focus groups or on surveys that were not borne out in practice. One interviewee noted that in some of their surveys, “people said they would come back . . . and then they didn’t. And so, there’s feelings of what data can you trust, what, how do you use that data to give yourself a picture, but not a definitive answer?” Another organization reported feedback from a focus group, whose participants said a barrier to attendance was the difficulty and cost of parking. An interviewee from the organization said they “tried to respond to that by introducing Uber vouchers, parking vouchers, various incentives to make it easier. . . . That has not worked. . . . So that just confirms to us that you can’t always take research at face value.”

Interviewees at over one third of organizations said a potential weakness of emphasizing data and market research is the risk that data might overshadow mission in driving priorities. For instance, some felt that data findings could be used as a basis for inappropriate programming decisions. One such individual cautioned that quantitative research is important but “if we were only to program in that way you would really lose out on the artistic mission.” Another interviewee was concerned that if an audience did not like a particular piece by one

composer “we might take that to mean we should never play that composer.” Individuals did not necessarily feel that this happened – the person just quoted was clear that he knew of no example where this had occurred. However, findings indicate that the concern is there. In addition to producing a more effective data collection process, having a clear and mission-driven purpose for data collection may help to alleviate such concerns.

Recognizing the realities of the rewards and challenges in advance can inform the decision and help in developing a plan. Organizations thinking about whether and how to engage with data may benefit from addressing the following questions:

- What decisions need to be made? What type of information will most help the organization make better decisions and answer its questions?
- What financial and staff time resources will be needed? Are they already available or will the organization need to seek external funding, for instance, to obtain external expertise for a particular effort?
- Can the organization more effectively use existing data sources? One area for consideration here is the organization’s ticketing database, and ways it may be strengthened (e.g., by storing information in a consistent way) for use as a source of ongoing information on audiences.

Conclusion

Data should not be seen as a cure-all even under the best of circumstances. Productive engagement with data requires good data that are appropriate for the intended purposes. A major lesson from the experience of initiative participants is that fruitful use of data is not just about the data – it is about how one approaches the data, the questions that are posed, and a willingness to revise approaches and preconceptions. Nonprofits are often required to utilize data to provide metrics of success for external parties upon which their continued funding may depend. It is critical to note that the continuous learning process utilized in the BAS initiative saw “failure” as part of the process. The errors surfaced in data that have been reported in this discussion were not secrets from the funder, nor did they provoke cancellation of grants. To the contrary, the very point of the four-step continuous learning cycle – design, implementation, analysis, and determination of changes needed to improve – is the assumption that data help in part because it is unlikely that organizational efforts will work the first time; those will be refined and improved based on what is learned.

We do not mean here to idealize the initiative, or to imply that its implementation was without considerable challenges. We do, however, mean to underscore that to take a deliberative approach to using data, whether it is done internally or with respect to external report-

ing, there has to be a way to allow a frank assessment of what works and what does not work in a productive rather than punitive fashion.

We close with an additional point. Our review of the literature on audience building revealed an interesting dichotomy between those who regard market research as a key tool and others who see it as a somewhat manipulative effort at sales, rather than meaningful engagement.³ But what was so striking in the present research was that we found over and over again that data, and an openness to what the data said, prompted organizations to confront their own insularity and recognize the extent to which they had not been understanding the perspective of external constituencies. Data is not engagement, and knowing about an audience is not the same as developing a relationship with that audience. But recognizing misconceptions, being prompted to ask about the audience rather than taking it for granted that you understand audience members, or that they think as you do – all of these can contribute importantly to relating differently. This was powerfully conveyed by one interviewee whose comments illustrate well how

a deliberative engagement with data can heighten an organization's external focus. She said:

It's changing the way that we interact. We have a thing we say here all the time. Like do we know it or do we *really* know it? And with audiences, you have to always ask yourself that. . . . [What the] initiative helps us do is be in constant review. . . . We've gone from describing a couple of departments in this [organization] as outward-facing, and now we understand that we're all outward-facing.

Data is not a magic bullet — but when the right data are used with an openness to change and a willingness to question and revisit one's preconceptions, data can be a powerful tool indeed.

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3. Ostrower and Calabrese, *Audience Building and Financial Health in the Nonprofit Performing Arts*.



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