



A Series on Engagement, Part III:

NOW It's About You! Audience Engagement

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The last two E-News issues addressed community engagement - what it is and how to do it. Now we are going to finish the series by exploring audience engagement. Is there a difference between the two? Absolutely. While both have relationship building at the core, engaging the community is external. It's about getting out from behind your desk or bench and determining what the community needs from your organization - be it more programs, economic development, jobs. Thus, community engagement can be transformative - it's a way to make positive changes and have great impact beyond your walls.

Audience engagement is also relationship building, but it's internal. You're looking at engagement through your perspective and determining ways to bring the audience to you. In [Thinking about... Audience Development](#), the Heritage Lottery Fund put it best: audience engagement "involves making an effort to understand what (the audience wants) and presenting your heritage site, collection, or activity in a way which is accessible, inviting, and meaningful to them. It involves changing people's perceptions of heritage and building on-going relationships to encourage participation and support with as broad a range of people as possible for the long-term."

Yippee! It's about you and how the audience can help you! But how can you be successful at it? Here are a few suggestions:

1. Don't try to be everything to everyone at once, instead target and market to one or two audience types at a time. Determine what you want to achieve for each group and what you need to do to engage them. By concentrating your efforts, you can develop more stable and longer-term relationships with them. And don't forget - stronger relationships eventually lead to more and bigger donations!

2. Remove barriers. Are your programs one-sided, or are you appealing to the interests of many cultural backgrounds? Are you accessible? Is what you're presenting understandable? The time when a museum's or historic site's audience was walking in the door with arts knowledge is waning. Now visitors look to the organization to educate them. By becoming inclusive and relatable, the audience ceases being intimidated and no longer assumes they need to have extensive knowledge before they enter your hallowed halls. Become a comfortable place for them to explore their interests or new cultures. In doing so you become an important educational resource.
3. Make visits less observatory and more interactive. Create opportunities for the audience to interact on a physical, spiritual, participatory level. These could be workshops on historic techniques or special tours behind the stanchions. Use tools, such as videos or touch screens, to build on the visual experience and create a new type of connection between the visitor and the art or site.
4. Be less about velvet ropes and more about having fun. According to the NEA's [Strategic Plan](#), "Americans pursue informal arts activities for many of the same reasons they explore art online: for a greater degree of interactivity than they often find in traditional arts venues, for a more customized arts experience, and for the opportunity to combine art with social networking." Informal activities include arts festivals, but also those in non-traditional settings, such as churches. Similarly, visits to museums and historic sites are now viewed as social experiences in addition to educational ones. Are you providing opportunities where people can interact with the art or history - and each other?

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