Engagement Guide

A resource to support authentic and effective engagement with a broad and diverse constituency to make creative expression a recognized, valued, and expected part of their everyday lives.

Background

Creating Connection seeks to build a community expectation that opportunities to express and experience creativity are part of everyday life. It is focused on motivating the public to take action to bring more creative expression and experiences into their lives by working to ensure that people have access to opportunities to be creative—or to experience the creativity of others—in their communities and through the people and organizations they know and trust.

Our research shows that people of color, millennials, parents of young children, and women of all ages are more likely to value creative expression and experiences as a recognized and expected part of everyday life. But our research also showed that many arts and culture organizations are not as experienced or effective in reaching or engaging these demographics. Thus, one of our goals is to help those organizations use new approaches, messages, and programs to engage these constituencies in their work.

However, it is critical that we not exclude those who are already engaged in arts and culture experiences as we seek to expand our reach. Our challenge, then, is to understand how to engage new people and groups in authentic and effective ways, while holding on to those we already know well.

Questions to Ask

The first step in authentic and effective engagement is to identify as specifically as possible the people and groups you want to engage, and to capture what you already know about them. The following questions can help you think about and prioritize the people and groups who are the most valuable to you—and to whom your organization is most valuable.

Answers to these questions, can strengthen your ability to engage constituents in the creative experiences you have to offer. If you don’t know the answers, think about ways in which to get them answered. While focus group and survey research can be invaluable, you can also learn a great deal by inviting a group of people to participate in an informal conversation around a conference room table in your local library or by meeting one-on-one with community leaders.

Later in this guide, you’ll find tips on how to engage people and organizations authentically to foster trust and collaboration.

1. Who are the people and organizations that are already engaged with or support you?
   a. Who are they? (Describe them as specifically as possible.)
   b. Why do they care? (What do they value about arts and culture? What do they value about you and what you have to offer?)
   c. What are they already doing? (E.g., attending your events, supporting you financially, etc.) And what else might they do? (E.g., serve as “ambassadors” to introduce you to others)?
2. Who are the people and organizations you'd like to be better at engaging and motivating?
   a. Who are they? (Based on our research, consider people of color, millennials, parents of young children, and women of all ages.)
   b. Why should they care? (Refer to our research report for guidance on what the people listed above value about arts and culture experiences and opportunities.) How might the arts and cultural experiences, programs, or services you offer reflect what they care about and what they're looking for?
   c. What do you want them to do? (What specific action(s) do you want them to take, e.g., attend an event, participate in a creative experience you offer?)

3. For the new people and groups you want to engage, what do you need to do?
   a. What stands in your way of taking action to engage them?
   b. How can you overcome these barriers?
   c. Who can help you do this?
**Tips for engaging people and groups**

Effectively reaching and engaging people and groups—particularly in a multicultural society—requires recognition, respect, and engagement in cultural context. The tips below can help increase your relevance and impact as you develop and nurture new relationships to help make creative expression a recognized, valued, and expected part of everyday life.

### Tip 1: Check Your Assumptions at the Door
Identify any preconceived beliefs or stereotypes. Your best intentions might be undermined by old assumptions or isolated experiences.

- Ask for advice and information from leaders in the community, and examine the work of organizations and programs that already serve them.
- Check your ego and approach the work with an open mind, an open heart, and a sense of humor.

### Tip 2: Understand the Cultural Context(s) of the People You Want to Engage
While our research suggests people find connection with themselves and others as a key motivator for expressing themselves creatively, they have other needs and values that drive their behaviors. The more you learn about specific communities, the more effective you can be.

- Be aware of unique norms, traditions, dialects, and historical experiences and attitudes that might impact your engagement.

### Tip 3: Invest Before You Request
To build trust and the foundation for long-term relationships, it’s essential to “invest” in the community you want to engage instead of only reaching out to them when you need or want something. Learn about their needs, attend their events, and participate in their efforts.

- Treat leaders, organizations and community members as partners with whom you wish to engage, not as a “tool” for your use. Seek to understand how you can add value for them.
- Stay in touch. Once you establish a new relationship, maintain regular contact.

### Tip 4: Develop Authentic Relationships
In developing programs or messaging to motivate people to want more creative expression and experiences in their lives, engage people and organizations from the outset in idea generation, feedback, and decision-making. The best relationships focus on ongoing collaboration.

- Go to the community. Work with allies that already have a relationship with members of the community. If they believe your motives are authentic, they can help open doors.
- Be supportive as issues important to the community come up, even if those issues are not always your own priorities.

### Tip 5: Build Shared Ownership
Look for opportunities for the community to become vested in building public will for arts and culture as a shared goal. Identify opportunities for leadership roles and engage stakeholders as decision-makers and owners of strategy. Actively seek guidance and input. Listen to and act upon advice.

- Make sure there are seats at the table for people who represent the groups you want to engage.
- Engage partners as “adaptors,” not “adopters.” Learn from how they change and improve ideas, and incorporate what you learn.
Tip 6: Walk Your Talk
If you say your programs are open to all members of the community and based on its needs, that must be what people experience. If you commit to collaboration, you must act collaboratively. If you commit to serving “everyone,” your staff and partners need to reflect the community.

- Look at who your boards, advisors, staff leaders, and program staff and volunteers are. Do they reflect the community in which you live and the people you wish to engage and serve?
- Model the behavior you encourage in others, and deliver on your promises.

Tip 7: Relate, Don’t Translate
Translation makes things readable, but not necessarily relevant. Ensure that content resonates with the culture and identity of the people and organizations you’re trying to reach. Take into account how they will interpret you and what you say. Use appropriate interpersonal communication dynamics and culturally relevant imagery, vocabulary, vernacular, metaphors, or slang.

- Determine if your existing communications are based on cultural context.
- Hire qualified, certified translators who are translating into their native language.

Tip 8: Anticipate Change
Motivating people to take action to bring more creative expression or experiences into their lives might suggest changes in how you are structured, governed and staffed. It will impact how consensus is built, and how decisions are made.

- Recognize that your process and approach might change based on having new people at the table who hold a different worldview.
- Continue to build infrastructure to support success.

For more information on how to engage diverse people and groups in an authentic manner, you can download the white paper from which these tips have been drawn at www.metgroup.com/assets/MCC.pdf.