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WHAT WE'RE LEARNING: HOW THREE GRANT RECIPIENTS ENGAGED THEIR AUDIENCES COST-EFFECTIVELY

THE QUICK TAKE

RECIPIENTS	THE CHICAGO CHAMBER MUSICIANS, www.chicagochambermusic.org EVANSTON SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA, www.evanstonsymphony.org SILK ROAD THEATRE PROJECT, www.srtp.org
CHALLENGE	Rather than “do more with less,” these groups wanted do more with what they already had in order to engage their audiences under a poor economy.
SOLUTION	Tap into existing resources; give to the audience in ways that give back.
RESULTS	Richly varied and positive: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Chicago Chamber Musicians had 1,273 unique site visitors the month it rolled out an asset-based incentive. • Evanston Symphony Orchestra swapped a soloist encore for hundreds of e-mail addresses belonging to people who support its mission. • Silk Road Theatre Project saw a 90% increase in individual gifts and a 36% increase in the number of donors when it used its own donors to make the case for support.
IMPACT	All three groups are ramping up asset-based audience engagement practices and have gained organization-wide buy in for cost-effective new media tools.
AWF SUPPORT	Six grants to three groups totaling \$55,500.

THE PROJECTS

While many nonprofits take a “wait and see” approach to the economy or struggle to “do more with less,” others question the conventional wisdom and grim adages of these recessionary times. By creatively using existing assets and resources, arts organizations can take audience engagement and donor development to new levels in the digital age.

Silk Road Theatre Project, which showcases playwrights of Asian, Middle Eastern and Mediterranean backgrounds, knew it could not afford to wait out the recession. Instead, it made some difficult, short-term budget cuts while borrowing a best practice from larger institutions – the use of third-party endorsements. Silk Road produced a series of testimonial videos starring its own donors, who describe what Silk Road means to them in compelling, personal terms that go far beyond what the organization could ever say about itself.

This not only left Silk Road free to focus its annual appeal on recent successes and future plans, it completely changed the tone of the ask, and the audience loved it: People who received the appeal letter with a web link to the videos spent almost twice as long watching them as those who clicked through via an e-newsletter. Several even called to thank Silk Road for taking a refreshingly positive approach. When Silk Road used an existing resource – its donors – to make a credible, heartfelt case for support, the organization saw a 90% increase in annual fund income and a 36% increase in the number of donors.

Grammy finalist The Chicago Chamber Musicians also creatively merged a best practice with existing resources. It knew that increased exposure to chamber music is a proven way to grow an audience. To get there, the ensemble took something it already had – a vast library of recorded music – and gave some of it away, in the form of one free download per month. This approach is paying dividends online – the incentive helped grow the e-newsletter subscriber base by 44 percent since January 2008 – and in the concert hall, where one of its free concerts drew its largest audience in 14 years.

Evanston Symphony Orchestra turned this website-to-concert-seat pathway on its head, using the energy and excitement of a live concert to drive supporters to its website, where it can cost-effectively cultivate them between performances. This 64-year-old community orchestra had tried several traditional and e-marketing techniques that fell flat. But when it offered to call a soloist out for an encore – again, a

resource that it already had – if at least 200 people signed up for the e-newsletter during intermission, a motivated audience responded with 282 e-mail addresses, including 78 that were completely new to the group, and 47 for patrons whose database records were missing an e-mail address. To communicate with them, Evanston Symphony Orchestra makes the most of art in the age of digital reproduction: It made a one-time investment in design services, so that its volunteers can reformat and reuse digital images, creating high-quality e-mails that reinforce the organization’s brand and identity, without imposing new costs.

THE TAKEAWAYS

Silk Road co-founder Malik Gillani stresses that no one asset-based practice is the silver bullet. His group is deeply committed to audience engagement and, as a result, keeps finding opportunities to do more with what they already have. A visiting playwright’s itinerary can expand to include a discussion, over tea, with audience members. The first time it acquires a patron’s e-mail address, Gillani takes a moment to send a brief message, thanking them for their support. Silk Road even uses leftover contribution envelopes as program stuffers, a practice that brings in a small but steady stream of extra gifts without costing Silk Road a dime for postage or additional print costs.

When it first began to scale new media’s learning curve, The Chicago Chamber Musicians found web management and content creation to be time-consuming tasks and the return on investment wasn’t always clear. Under these conditions, it took a leap of faith to give away a monthly music download. Happily, the results have gone beyond increased web traffic: Investing in its website has given The Chicago Chamber Musicians clear metrics for tracking audience engagement, both on its site and in its seats. Now the entire organization can see how a robust online presence engages and expands its audience. As a next step, the group is building a comprehensive database of its recordings that it will support not only to its audience development initiatives, but also to back-office functions and the professional development of its musicians.

New media is, well, new and so the jury is still out on how different audiences will respond to what arts groups can offer patrons through their websites. Silk Road shows us that, with the right hook, direct mail can drive people to a web site, an interesting angle on the interplay between traditional and web-based communications. The Chicago Chamber Musicians and Evanston Symphony Orchestra are constantly testing and tracking which practices appeal to their older and younger audience members. The orchestra’s Board President, Penelope Sachs, believes that the time spent figuring it out does triple-duty: it continually improves the database, routes feedback on marketing materials right back to the organization and offers the opportunity to be responsive to patrons.

Ms. Sachs observes that while more and more older patrons are reading the electronic version of Keynotes, Evanston Symphony Orchestra’s newsletter, the group is always happy to fine-tune communication preferences. Switching patrons, at their request, from the electronic to the hard-copy version of Keynotes, or vice-versa, is an attentive gesture, and a reminder to the group that the newsletter is read and appreciated. It does good for everyone involved.