

CPR for Growing Audience

June 8, 2024

ERIC NELSON: If you know anything about TRG, sort of two things are constant. One, we love PowerPoint. So there will always be some PowerPoint presentation. And we love some data. So to kick things off with data, this comes from our arts and culture benchmark, where we're track-ing the results of about 300 arts organizations in the US, 40 orchestras in that mix. And this is orchestra data of ticket sales in a 12-month period through the first quarter of this year, backing up 12 months, and then comparing it to 12 months from a similar timeline pre-pandemic.

So look at that, revenue, ticket sales up almost 50 percent. Super exciting. Ticket units up 12. So we've like — we've turned a corner as a sector, which is really exciting to see. So we should feel like our cups are just running over, right? All that coffee, all that good stuff. Like we are in an abundance mentality. Yet, why does it feel like this? Like if Xena Warrior Princess can't get the boulder all the way up the mountain, how can we?

Like one of the biggest things we hear over and over again is it feels really hard right now. For all the reasons that you all know. The cost of our doing business has gone up dramatically. Fundraising hasn't bounced back in the same ways that ticket sales has. There's all kinds of change. Our customers are showing up in new ways. So even though our cup is filling, it feels really hard. So that actually was our sort of inspiration for getting together and putting this presentation in place, was how can we share what we're seeing that's working to help relieve some of that tension so we can just feel stronger and actually experience the growth that hap-pens when the cup gets full that way.

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So here's our agenda for today. We're going to introduce ourselves, dive into some data. We've got three case studies to share to talk about those tactics and strategies that are doing well, and then hopefully have some time for questions and conversation. So Kate, I'm going to ask you to lead the introductions off.

KATE HAGEN: Sure. Hi, I'm Kate Hagen. I'm a senior consultant at TRG Arts. And just in case you didn't get your concert reminder email, I'm here playing the role of Michael Smith today. And I promise that we will not change the program.

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KATE: Hi, everybody. I would like to admit, I was a pianist, not like a theatre person. So mics are hard. I'm Kate Hagen. I'm a senior consultant at TRG Arts. I'm speaking today on behalf of Charleston Symphony. If you didn't get your concert reminder email, please make sure you're subscribed. But Michael wasn't able to join us, so he designated me, and I promise I will not be changing the repertoire.

JOSH: And I'm Josh Tague, the director of marketing and communications with the Omaha Symphony. Welcome.

ELISHA JOHNSON: Hi, I'm Elisha Johnson with the Arkansas Symphony and I'm the associate director of audience engagement.

ERIC: Excellent. I just get to have the pleasure of being in the presence of this greatness. Eric Nelson from TRG, as I mentioned. And TRG, if you don't know who we are, we're a consulting firm that partners with performing and visual arts organizations of all shapes and sizes, to grow revenue, and get more individuals to participate. So how do you get more single ticket buyers to come in your venues, how you get them to come back with regularity, and then how you get them to become donors. We partner with organizations to try to make that pathway work and be as robust as possible.

And as you heard me mention, we have this arts and culture benchmark. It's free for the sector to use. If you're not a member, check out our website. We'll send links with the presentation if you'd like to join. But it gives you a chance to track your data, how your results are going, ver-sus those other organizations I mentioned that are in the benchmark, there's about 40 plus or-chestras. Because you can look at how my data is doing versus all of those other orchestras to see how you stack up. And like I said, this is what we're seeing data-wise on the ticket sales side, this cup runneth over feeling, which is really exciting to see.

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While our numbers are going up, we're also looking at how patrons have changed over time. This is actually data that Google has shared; to say we're noticing buyer behavior be very dif-ferent post-pandemic. So our ways of marketing, our ways of engaging folks needs to change and morph with the times as people are doing this. They want things that are easier to interact with. So if your website is difficult, or your apps, to buy a ticket, that's a stumbling block that showing up even with

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more challenge than ever before. New escapes. People want to get out of the stress of their day-to-day lives. So they're looking at new ways to get release and enjoyment.

They also are inventing — reinventing themselves. So people want more self-care. The arts is a great way to lean into that. They have different priorities. One of the things under number four that it says that I find so important is they're cutting out the irrelevance. So think about how many of us — those email blasts that we get are just crowding our inbox, that we're just hitting, delete, unsubscribe, unsubscribe, unsubscribe. So how do we make our content as relevant for our folks as possible?

And new accountability. People want their dollars to be spent in places that align with their values. So how do we have messaging that speaks to that at the same time? Also, those pesky patrons, they're showing up buying tickets later than ever before. Or at least we think. How many people think this is true? Interesting. So this is a chart that shows the pace of ticket sales pre-pandemic versus post pandemic. It's hard to see there are two lines in there, because they're almost identical.

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So actually, patrons aren't buying tickets any later than pre-pandemic, we're just paying attention to it more. And it still means that people bought a whole lot in the last two weeks leading up to a performance. But thinking about understanding what the true rhythms are. There's sort of this new age of data that we're in to really get away from the anecdotal data, we think it's this way, but actually understanding what's truly going on within the data set.

The other thing we're noticing, as we as a sector — I was talking about this yesterday. We kind of hate watch subscriptions. When are they going to go away? Why do we still have them? Like that article that shows up in the New York Times every year that just questions why they have it. There's a whole sector outside of the arts that is growing subscription behavior. People want to commit to things. There's actually a conference now all about subscriptions called Sub Summit. And they would tell you, these are the different types of subscription models that are growing with leaps and bounds in this country. So how do we reinvent our own packages to align with what people want today?

And speaking of what people want, it's not just coming into our venues and showing up. It's the before they buy, interacting with our websites, and it's the post afterwards. Because people go through this process. Am I an arts person? If I'm a new buyer, is this something I really want to purchase? Should I get off my couch? Is that worth it? You know, will I even like symphony? Do I even know what that word means? What is chamber music? All of these things don't make sense. I have to

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get in my car and drive downtown. Are you kidding me? Ugh. Like all of these things that we have to help manage and motivate off of.

And from soup to nuts. From the front end, all the way to the back end of the experience, from purchasing a ticket to the thank you email they get when they get home. So before I turn it over to Kate, and welcome her to the Charleston Symphony story, another thing that we were talking about as we were putting this presentation together was applause. Applaud — applauding the great work that's going on, where we're seeing impact. And also this debate we're having as a sector about those new people who show up in our venues, and they applaud at the wrong time.

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Ugh. And then what happens is they get shushed, and they don't feel comfortable coming into our venues. So I think it was Kate, you and the Charleston team were talking about, if you hear applause at the wrong time, what does that mean? There's someone new in our venue. And if we don't hear applause at the wrong time, we don't have new people in our venues. So what if we actually during a, you know, stage welcome or a stage pitch, actually said to our audience before the concert starts, “Hey, we're so excited to have brand new people here. We're so excited to have our long-standing folks.

For those of you who've been here before, if you hear some applause at times that you don't recognize it, that actually says we have new people and shouldn't we celebrate that and actually make people feel welcome at the same time. So on that note, I'm going to turn it over to Kate..

KATE: Hi, everybody, can you hear me this time? Great. I've had the great pleasure of working with Michael Smith and Alana Morrall and their team at the Charleston Symphony over the last two seasons, and Michael sends his regrets. But we've had some — those of you who know Michael will not be shocked. There are big, big dreams that he has for his ensemble. Pre-pandemic, the Charleston Symphony fought its way out of a structural deficit. Those of you who — who've done that, yourselves know how — how much effort that can be. They were just out of it. And then the pandemic hit.

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And Michael and the board and the staff said we're not doing that again; we are going to bounce back as fast as possible. There were opportunities in Charleston. It is a city that's growing at three times the rate of the United States overall. It's estimated that about 30 people a day move into Charleston, [520 8th Avenue, Suite 2005, New York, NY 10018](https://www.americanorchestras.org)

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spanning young people coming in to start their careers, as well as people moving down for warmer weather from markets in the north. It's also a city that's really grappling with its past in a post-pandemic universe. Charleston is the site of the first shots of the Civil War. It had one of the largest slave markets in the country. It's estimated that 48 percent of the Africans who were brought to this — to North America, not just the US, as slaves came through the Port of Charleston. And that is still there in the dynamic of the people who live in the city.

So when I said, well, what does growth look like for you all? What would you want the hall to look like? The board said, “We want audiences who look like our existing audience. We want to see singles and subscriptions growing and growing fast. We want to see younger audiences. We want to see more racially diverse audiences. And essentially, we want to just see everything happening all the time all at once.” How many of you have been in one of those meetings? Yeah. So we said, okay, there's a lot of ambition here. We're going to move in a stepwise approach and make progress against these goals in different ways. Lots of detail.

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The quick story here, if we look at FY '19, last fiscal season, completed pre-pandemic, FY '24 that just closed in April. Single tickets are up by 68 percent. Subscription packages have recovered to 97 percent of the pre-pandemic levels. So, and they're on track right now to set a record in subscription sales for FY '25 if we keep pacing, as we are. So the growth is happening. There are more people in the hall and there's more revenue coming through.

I'm going to highlight just a couple of the ways that we got there. In terms of campaign adjustments, we've really leaned into direct marketing. So mail, email, and digital advertising, and thinking really strategically about how — who we're targeting and with what message. We've expanded their holiday programming and really leaned into, what is the experience in the hall, and are we setting the right tone for the community of Charleston that we want to build future forward? This season, we had some programs that we knew were going to resonate really well, like the Planets and Cirque Nights. And then there was a Bruckner program in November. And Bruckner is beautiful and lovely and long and hard to get across to folks.

And so we did our best to try to tell a beautiful story about Bruckner. But we also thought, how could we borrow from, say, baseball teams? What could we do that might create at least one night at the symphony that might pull in some folks on a different level? And we created the bring your bestie to the symphony night. So it was a buy one get one ticket and a free glass of bubbly. And we advertised that not just to our existing audience, but we went online and did a lot of promoted posts.

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Charleston does their own social media, y'all, and their own digital advertising. So it can happen. So these are some examples of that. The result was it was the youngest classical ticket buying audience we had all season with the exception of the Planets, which had screens and NASA imagery and all kinds of fun and games. And it was the most racially diverse classical audience of this season, which has been a big lift for us. On a program that didn't have special artists or special programming designed to reach that audience, it said you're welcome no matter who you are to this program.

We added holiday — extra performances of holiday. Charleston has long sold out of their holiday programming. And see Michael's note about getting out of structural deficit and recovering as fast as possible. Holiday Pops is one of their net revenue drivers in the year, and so we added a third performance, and it sold out. And the team went, gosh, I'm not sure we could do that a second time. There's competition now. This other orchestra in Charleston added their own Holiday Pops and stole our tagline. Flattery is — it's flattery, right?

So we actually did some looking at what happened this year in terms of the lead group. Who bought tickets to Holiday Pops? So about 40 percent of those buyers were new to file. But we saw lots of those folks were holiday renewal ticket buyers from the previous year. In fact, 33 percent of folks who came the prior year bought tickets again to Holiday Pops, we have sub add-ons. And so we started building some projections that said, okay, if we were able to get back those same renewals from Holiday Pops, and we were able to get add-ons from our subscribers, what would that start to do in terms of ticket sales? And what kinds of campaigns might we build around that, that would enable us to not just match last year's numbers, but start to see some incremental growth?

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So right now we're projecting we're going to sell add-ons to 10 percent of our subscribers. And in the midst of the subscription campaign, we're monitoring and telling if we're on that pace or not. We'll do the same thing when we get to the holiday renewal on sale in July and see, are we on pace at 33 percent or not, and have really good indicators well before we've even started marketing to the general market of whether we're on track to hit those objectives. Last but not least, making people feel welcome. Eric mentioned it yesterday. Most people decide — and let me step back. When do you think most people decide whether they're going to buy another ticket or not? In the course of a performance.

KATE: Yeah. Yeah, exactly. They're — if they haven't bought before the performance — they've even gotten to the hall, they decide within that first minute of sitting down in their seat. When we've surveyed people about why they don't come back, the number one response was parking, and the number two response was website, all of which they've experienced well before they even get into your venue. So we've really been working to say, before they even get inside and see the musicians, what's happening before you get in the venue?

The holiday program, which again, is one of their largest, we really focus on how we make the experience before you even get to the hall exceptional. So we've got the youth orchestra playing in the lobby, and carolers, we've got Santa there, there are photos for families set up. There's beverages and snacks. And it really feels like, ideally, you're actually in a Hallmark movie. We've also implemented regular post-concert surveys of our single ticket buyers that are two questions, and only ask them to give us feedback on the experience itself.

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And have used those surveys to be able to collaborate with the front of house team, which is — they report to the venue that we rent. And so those of you who rent your buildings and work with staff teams who are not your own will recognize sometimes our ideas about what's best for our audience can be really different. And those surveys have helped it not be the Charleston Symphony says or the performing arts center says, but our patrons say this, and what do we to-gether, Charleston symphony and performing arts center, want to do about that?

That has led to some implementations that are super small, like putting up a sign that says where the elevators are, because the stairs are really obvious, and the elevators are hidden in this building. Something as simple as the ushers have started greeting everyone with welcome before they scan a ticket. I know this stuff sounds really simple. But we've seen the impact in surveys as we've implemented those small changes. It's also surfaced some larger ones that 00 like parking egress issues that we need to navigate with the city. But it's elevated those in a way that gives us a lot of data, and it gets a lot more attention from external partners.

Also, sometimes we get some feedback that we're able to share on social media and other platforms that enable our audiences to say what the experience looks like for themselves and not be reliant on us to tell them. So with that, I'm going to hand it off to Josh.

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JOSH: Welcome. I'm going to talk a little bit about Omaha and what we're doing there. Trying to go with the initiative of preserving the current audience but obviously carrying forward into this new era, bring in new audiences. We've got our Omaha attitude. We really like to root for the home team in Omaha, and make sure that we're leaning into our local artists core, which is our orchestra. And we did reduce the distance earlier in the pandemic and a lot of other markets. So we just kind of kept engaging at a much smaller level than we are today. But I think that momentum helped us out early on.

We've tapped into the emotion of the experience. You're seeing this in the themes and some other talks as well. So it's not new. But I think that it's really working for us. And then obviously, bringing younger audiences in is a huge initiative. So looking at our demographics, from a study from last year, we see that about a third of our movies buyers are at that younger Millennial or even younger set. So we know that that's bringing those folks in. Masterworks is also leaning a little bit younger, you know? It's got this timelessness to it. And there's some excitement there and interest. But not so much on the subscription side yet. We'd really love to increase those — those series packages, of course.

It's also one of our most diverse audiences. But we've still got a lot of work to do there as well. And then Rocks Pops. That's a little more fixed. And so we've done some work around that. But yeah, currently you can see that most of those folks are in that over 60 set as of last year. So what do we do? We don't want our younger people to have to climb over a wall. We don't want our new folks to have to climb over something very tall and work really hard to get to us. So we just want a door that we can just have them slide open and come right on in.

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And so one of the ways that we've made things more accessible for us is Live with the Omaha Symphony. Essentially, it's our popular programming all put together in one. And so it allows us to put experiences in front of folks that are similar to what we've been putting on stage. But instead of putting them into these little boxes, this is Pops, this is Rocks, this is movies, we're letting people know there's all kinds of different experiences that cross genres, and maybe don't fit in any of those buckets. So having that less constrained programming has been very nice for us on a lot of levels.

Not only are we, but you also know, a little bit more attractive to people that are new, like, oh, what is this Live with the Omaha Symphony thing? What are you guys doing? But we don't have to worry about saying, okay, we need six doubles for Pops, and they have to be in that jazz show tunes, you know, '50s, '60s kind of set. And then for Rocks, they need to be Fridays, and we need five of those.

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And it's been kind of tough to do that. And then with movies, you know, we want to do two, but we can only do one on a package and one off.

And you know, trying to figure that balance out. I'm sure some of you have struggled with that before. This has allowed us to put everything under one banner and really do what we think is going to be best not only for us internally for planning and working with other departments to say, hey, this is more cost effective, and you know, if we put this on stage it will be — have some demand to it. But we can also keep the packages. So we took our Pops, and now we call it Live One. And we have our Pop Sunday, and we call it Live Two.

But we can pull in people like Rick Steves, which isn't really a Pops thing, but it's not a Rocks thing. And he's showing some slides, but it's not really a movie. So where does that fit? And then we have an illusionist coming this this season as well. And Ben Folds is on our Live One and our Live Two. So it's just a — or is it Live One and Live Three? Now I got it mixed up. But the good thing is that we allow people to have more choices on what kinds of programs they want, whether it's on the single ticket level or on the package level.

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And you know, more variety is out there now. It is just genre-bending experiences that anyone can enjoy. So how do we invite them in? Well, lots of different ways. Video obviously has been a theme that we've seen around in a lot of these talks, and we're really leaning into that. We've got our own digital department that helps us create videos that really inspire and show off what we're all about. This is part of our Your Omaha Symphony campaign. So our digital department created this beautiful video to show off our musician, your Omaha stories, your Omaha places, your Omaha symphony. Anyone can come. It's a big, exciting time for anyone.

And so we saw this get a lot of traction. It feels like it's a great way to brand ourselves. But beyond making these really nice, polished videos, we've really leaned into dynamic social media as well. So this is really funny, because it could have just been a footnote. Someone sent an email to me a little over a month ago and said, "You know, hey, there's this carillon player who's going to be doing a little pre-concert thing for your season finale for your chamber series at the university." Okay, we could just stick that little note at the bottom of our website if we want it. But it just seemed interesting. Wait, what's a carillon? What's a campanile? What are we going to do?

So we created this video, and our communications manager meets up with the carillon player ahead of time, goes in, and I highly recommend you watch this video, it's so fun. Please, all of you follow us

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on Instagram. And, you know, go up inside, talk to him about it. He talks about what a carillon is, what he's going to do. And a lot of people came to this pre-concert performance that he put on, which was a really fun medley of a bunch of different classical music. It was beautiful, people of all ages, and we sold that concert out.

Normally, we get about 100 to 200 likes, we feel really good about that for most of our posts. This has well over 2,000 likes and thousands and thousands of views already. So it's kind of a simple thing that could have been, again, just a footnote, but leaning into that a little bit, and just using a cell phone to make this video.

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And then also with guests artists, we want to lean into videos as well. You know how it is, guest artists is coming in, and you put the requisite headshot up there and a little bit about their bio. And it's just not dynamic or interesting or engaging. But you can't get to them and go to their bell tower and talk to them. So you're asking them to provide content. Sometimes they have it, sometimes they don't. But this was something simple, where Michelle Kane didn't really have a promotional video per se. But her — we asked her team, they said, “Well, there is this really great video out there that we love,” but it was about 35 minutes long. We just asked them for their original file, cut it short, add a lower third, put it up, and it was a very successful promotional tool.

So lots of different ways to engage on video no matter what you're trying to promote. And also, of course, you want to add the copy that's very approachable and engaging for just anyone to come in. So you know, instead of really leaning heavily in on the composer or the conductor or the guest artist, we really say, break out the chairs and lawn coolers. You'll feel the thunder of percussionist playing. Prepare for a live surround sound effect. Now, we haven't changed the title of the program. It's still Tchaik 6. We didn't want to bury the lead. But when we put the poster up, we didn't talk about Tchaikovsky at all. We didn't put up a headshot of Tchaikovsky.

This is a dynamic drum concerto that we had going on. We really wanted people to know about that. And it became one of our bestselling Masterworks in the past seven seasons and our best-selling single ticket Masterworks this season. Some other experiential posts that we put up recently. One of them that I really loved was, we have our music director laureate come back after a few seasons of not being here, and we called it Wilkins Returns. And we knew a lot of people were going to know what that meant, what that was going to be.

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But for other folks who maybe didn't get to experience Thomas Wilkins when he was with the symphony for 16 years, they weren't necessarily going to understand why it's special. And so we asked him for quotes, and we put those out there and said, you know, I'm most excited about reconnecting with those onstage and off. That was my family for so many years. I think that's going to be very touching for the people that do know him, but it's also just going to let people have a peek into him. So that's just one more example of just being a little more personable, ap-proachable, and emotional.

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The impact of this is year over year, our organic Facebook reach, up 1600 percent, and our engagement, our interactions are up 21 percent. On Instagram, 100 percent reach and 100 percent interactions. A lot of that's from very recent times with some shifts that we've made with how we're putting things out there and what we're saying. So we get them to the hall. What kind of experience do we want them to have? So they get there, and they say, oh okay, so you got the main floor on the left, first tier up there, second tier there. You know, it was okay. A thousand tickets isn't bad for that concert.

But if you're new, and you're sitting down there in the orchestra circle, or maybe up in the second tier, you bought a cheaper seat, you see these giant gaps, and it just doesn't feel like — should I even be here? They made it sound so cool when I saw it online. So we worked with TRG to rescale our concert hall and use demand management to sort of release seats as we go, which seems very daunting. And at first, it is hard. It is that Xena Warrior Princess pushing that rock up the hill.

But once we did that rescale and work with demand management — this is a concert that had only 50 more tickets sold. So now when you're coming for your first time and you look around and you see all these other people there, it just feels exciting and engaging, and you feel like you should be there. And you know, you see, we've still got all those holes in the back, because it was a, you know, mid, mid to high demand kind of concert. But it just totally puts this into a different type of experience for folks.

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And so, you know, lots of little details go into the pricing and what price levels are available as you move things back. But, you know, the nuts and bolts of it aren't as — nearly as important as the success that you see at the end. And so I think that brings us to my colleague, Elisha, and I'll let her come up. Thank you.

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[APPLAUSE]

ELISHA: Hi, I'm with the Arkansas Symphony once again. And like many orchestras, we saw a decline, a slow decline in our single tickets and subscription. And of course, when COVID hap-pened, it was like an increase and downhill kind of. But I am happy to say that we have had the best-selling season ticket season since 2014 in both revenue and unit. And that was a lot of fac-tors in play. You know, we had a great team. But I'm going to talk about two things that really helped us grow this year. And that is listening to our patrons, whether it's looking at the data, looking at social media, what they're interested in.

And we're also growing repeated — repeatable revenue. And that's through our membership program, which I will go more in detail about later in this presentation. One series that really shocked us is that our chamber series actually sold out every time. Every concert sold out. And because they were selling out, they were selling in advance, every time that someone returned a ticket, they will sell out, they will just sell just like that. And so we tried to just adjust the prices by dynamic pricing. So we went from \$30 to \$60. And they were still getting snatched up.

So I think a lot of people were really into the experience of chamber — the chamber series. They were getting a nice view. Here, I can show you the nice view right there. This is the — where we perform the chamber series, is at the Clinton Library. They were getting, you know, great intimate music and wine with it. So it was just all about the experience. And I think that really gravitated to our younger audience, the — specifically the Millennials. We saw more Millennials attending the chamber series than the Masterwork series, which is really cool to see.

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And we are expanding the series because of our selling out. We're adding more concerts, doing double concerts. And we're actually going to be relocated to our new music center, which is what I showed in the previous slide. So we're really excited about that. And just this is a breakout of generation. Of course, we knew that there was going to be a lot of Boomers coming to the chamber series. But it was just — like I say, it was really cool to see that there's more Millennials coming to the chamber series than our Masterworks. And we still see — we have some Gen X — Gen Z coming into our chamber and Masterworks. So that's nice to see.

So our next thing is that our membership program has really helped us grow our audiences. And this is a — this was a way for us to be more accessible, to create more diversity in our audience, and just

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for it to be very flexible. And this is a membership that — it's \$9 a month, that you get to go to any concert that they want. And we kind of describe it as Netflix for the symphony. So symphony — your symphony on your schedule. So it was very flexible, and it's really simple to use. I'm going to go more in detail about the differences between subscription and membership.

But first, this is our journey and how we got started with membership. So we started in 2017. And it was very — it was a — it wasn't like a really — a lot of acquisition push against it. It was just maybe like a postcard in the email. We didn't do too much. And then we would just bring it back sometimes. It wasn't really advertised for a few years. And then really just last year, we really started to push membership. And that's when we really saw the growth in membership.

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And every — after every concert we would just send a postcard about membership to a new to files, and new to files really gravitated towards it. So what's the differences between subscription and concert membership? So, we all know that subscription is like a fixed package. They get to go to certain concerts in whatever series they want to choose. But with membership, it's a reoccurring payment, it's an automatic payment. And the catch with that, membership will have to reserve their own ticket and they're limited to certain price levels in our hall. They don't get the same seats. It's not guaranteed. They could, but it just — it's just not guaranteed like subscription is. It's just based off of availability. And subscription, they get some certain discounts that membership won't get. So that's like the big differences between subscription.

Here's a chart that shows just the growth of our membership program. So the left side half was, like I was saying, we didn't really advertise membership as much between 2022 and 2023, kind of halfway. But we are really amped it up like in the middle of 2023. So I'm going to talk about the journey of that. So like I said, this is the season open push, that was the first time that we really started advertising it a little bit.

And then we had Jurassic Park. So Jurassic — this was the first time that we sent a postcard to our new to file list. We just wanted — at first we did the — we did a big discount to them. We just gave them 30 percent off at first. But we were like, let's just try giving them a membership push. So we gave them a membership postcard, and it really came off really well. I guess they really — they really liked how flexible it is. And it's pretty cheap. Nine dollars a month, don't think about it. We don't think about our Netflix stuff, you know? It just comes out of our bank account.

[0:36:20.9]

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So I think that really gravitated towards a lot of new to files. The postcard started. We had a full campaign in the summer of our membership program. We had three waves of postcards go out. And that's when we saw a lot of growth. And that was throughout the summer last year. And then the holiday concert. This holiday concert was basically sold out. So we did another big, big push with membership, and sent it to new to files, and that's what we saw a last big push into the new year.

So, and then you do see a little dip in our membership. But that's just because we just transitioned over to subscriptions, stuff like the renewal. So we just shifted our focus a little bit. But we still continue to advertise membership to our new to files after every concert. One thing that we heard from members is that they really liked the access. And this is part of our campaign from last summer. We gave members early access. Like if you became a member, you get early access to purchase Star Wars tickets. Star Wars was the only concert at the time that wasn't part of the membership program. So they had to buy their tickets. And they also got a discount. So that really gravitated towards a lot of people we. That's where we saw a big push in membership.

So this is the turn. So the purple, that's our new — like the people who have onboarded to our membership program. And then the green blue is the turn line. And we really have got more new members in than we've turned. All the turn has come from credit card expirations. And what we've done with the system that we've used, they're able to email certain patrons whose credit card is about to expire. So that's how we can kind of catch some people before they turn. But like I said, we've grown members more than we've lost members. So it hasn't been a problem for us at all.

[0:38:26.1]

And then, here's what we're doing after now. So we — since membership has gone really well, we have introduced the membership plus tier, which I'll explain the differences between membership plus and regular membership. And we really wanted to increase retention and the reservation rate. So we're just emailing our members and reminding them, hey, reserve your tickets, make sure you're there. It's a — you get your free ticket. So make sure you reserve. So make sure to do that.

And we're also considering how we can leverage giving. We have a lot of members, and some members maybe think that they already give with their nine dollars, but that's not a giving. So we're going to try to figure out a way for them to become donors after they become a member. And like I said, these are the differences between our regular concert member and our membership plus. We heard a lot of feedback from our regular members, and how they wanted extra seat level access.

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So the membership plus will grant them a higher seat level in the hall. And they will have access to all concerts. We kind of limited a few concerts from the regular membership, but we're still able to advertise it the same way. We're still able to say 29 plus concerts, and it's just because we are adding more concerts to our chamber series. So they're not really losing so much. They're just losing those two Artists of Distinction concerts. But yeah, that's the end of mine. And I hope that you enjoyed this presentation. I'm going to hand it over to Eric.

[APPLAUSE]

[0:40:18.4]

ERIC: I love that churn slide about membership just boggles my mind. Because we — you know, as a sector, we're talking about churn all the time and how you have people coming in, but they don't return. But you're losing so few of them. And just that model of, you know, the flexibility that really matches up with what people need and want. And they're — you know, there is a little bit of just, it just gets charged out of my card, so I don't even think about it. So there's that special glow that happens. But Elisha, during the pandemic, you lost almost no members, right?

ELISHA: No, we didn't lose any members during — during the pandemic. And we were just able to give them some archival video. But like I said, don't think about it. So they just stuck on. So yeah.

ERIC: Yeah, there was no programming for them to even use.

ELISHA: Yeah, there was no programming.

ERIC: But they just like — yeah, indeed. It's kind of amazing. But interesting ways to lean into, you know, what style of programming people want. The other interesting thing is you don't see cannibalization on your subscription side. So the subscription numbers haven't gone down as a result of the membership, or people haven't migrated really to that.

ELISHA: No, only — there's certain cases where we would have lost subscribers in the first place. So when we are about to lose a subscriber, we just go ahead and tell them about membership. And that's how we can keep them. So it's just been a great backup in a way to keep people in the hall.

ERIC: Indeed. Well, so proud of all — I'm going to go back to the slide for a second — of, a, all the work that you all are doing, and just getting to partner with these organizations and see this growth is really exciting. We're also really proud at TRG, when we look at, especially in the benchmark, how clients we're working with stack up to the sector writ large. So you know, frequency of people coming back, recency of people coming back, industry averages 43, 25 percent. Clients working with TRG, 58 percent, 32 percent.

[0:42:26.8]

So just the ability to see the strategies in action and the growth that comes from that. We're just proud of that work. And if you all — if anybody's interested in talking through that, even puzzling through ideas for your own, we always offer these free hours of free consulting. So you'll get my contact information here. If you want to book an hour to puzzle through ideas. No obligation. Just happy to do that as you're thinking through how you CPR your own programs and whatnot. We personally are — purposely built in lots of time here to have questions, feedback, whatnot. So let's open it up to see what questions you all have for our panelists and where and how they got to the places they decided. Yeah? Actually, would you mention name and organization that you're with? Yeah.

SARAH MCCARTHY: I'm Sarah McCarthy with the Bangor Symphony Orchestra in Maine. I'm curious, and I might — I'm sorry if I missed — missed it in your presentation from Arkansas. When they have a membership, how many people are you seeing? Maybe — what percentage of people are actually choosing their seats and coming?

[0:43:55.9]

ELISHA: So we have seen about — I mean, about 60 percent of people reserving their tickets, but we make sure to send them an email before each concert to make sure they're reserving. Now we do not have a way to track if they actually came. It's just that hall is huge, so we're not able to scan their tickets to see if they actually come. So the only way we can see is that we're there and we could just look at the hall and see if there's any holes. If there's holes, we're able to look that up and see which members are coming.

SPEAKER: And can people show up on the day of concert and walk in?

ELISHA: Yes, they can. They can show up and they can just say like, hey, I'm a member. We can look them up — look them up. They have a tag, and we can go ahead and get them their free ticket.
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BOB BAUER: Hi, I am Bob Bauer from Schenectady Symphony in New York. How did you arrive at the \$9 and \$18 per month? Because this idea is very intriguing to me for our audience.

ELISHA: So It first started with the St. Paul Chamber. They kind of gave us a little idea about that. And from what I remember, they experimented with \$9 versus \$6. And really, there was no difference between them. They were like going at the same rate. So we just went with the \$9. And like I said, we wanted to be more accessible. And we also looked at other different things like Netflix and like some other different apps and stuff that people use. So it was kind of keep-ing up with the trends of what people was already using. So it just made sense to do that.

SPEAKER: I want to add to that one thing. This year, because we have been tracking how many concerts on average members reserve, it's usually two to three concerts per member. And so the cost of \$9 a month actually does work out to about the — a slight discount over what the average single ticket price would be. And the \$18 we designed, knowing what the price of the A level seats was and sort of estimating on some of those. So there's ways that — the initial number just happened to work out kind of nicely to what their behavior's doing and what that works out to in terms of price. And subscribers are still saving more on average per concert than members.

SPEAKER: And have you experimented with any Black Friday sales for membership?

ELISHA: Sorry, what was that?

SPEAKER: Any Black Friday sales? That's when I get my Netflix.

[0:46:33.5]

ELISHA: We do have Black Friday sales. Some members take advantage of the Black Friday sales, but it's mainly for our single ticket buyers. So yeah.

SAMMY: I'm Sammy from the Amarillo Symphony in Texas. I have a question about kind of Omaha. It was mentioned that y'all block off seats to kind of create more people in one area. Do you ever experience subscribers not coming to concerts, not releasing their tickets? That's something that we experience. And so we'll have like, you know, one row right in the middle just empty, because we have

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so many subscribers that just like, you know, they don't go, they don't tell anyone they're not going. And we're trying to do things to combat it. But I'm curious to see what you guys do about that.

JOSH: That has not changed for us. That is the same issue, unfortunately. Luckily, I was able to find an example where it looked like a lot of people showed up. If you have — you know the green and the red, you know what that's all about. And — but even recently, we had a Master-works concert where every ticket was sold, it was just all red on that map, and I just couldn't wait to see it. And I sat up in the first tier. And there's that line, and there's those two, and there are those four.

[0:47:59.2]

And that's totally different conversation I think a lot of us should continue to have, but we know that that's just going to be a tricky wicket no matter what, you know? There's just a lot of steps to that. So I wish that we could build that into this whole demand planning piece. But I will say we still feel like it just feels better, you know? Because at least we're controlling the things we can, and can't make our subscribers, unfortunately come, and/or give their tickets away. I love it when I see subscribers, they're like, "Hey, I don't see you often because I don't come very often. But I always give my neighbor the tickets instead." And I'm like, "Hey, I know your neighbor. I see him more than you. Well, thanks for doing that." So some people do that. But yeah, that's — that's a tough one.

SAMMY: We're kind of doing that, but it's still sort of new. So obviously we're still experienc-ing the problem, is encouraging our subscribers to release their tickets. And then we're trying to actually give those tickets to youth orchestra families. We run — the Amarillo Youth Sympho-ny is run through our office. So we're trying to encourage — so it's more like if you release your ticket, it's going to go to a family of, you know, aspiring musicians, rather than just like, we're going to resell it. At times we do resell it, because they just release it like two days before. But if we have that in advance, that's — if anyone's interested, that's something we're trying to do. But it's still kind of new, and we're still just trying to get that messaging out there. But always curious to see what others are doing. So —

JOSH: That does sound like a good idea. And I did talk to someone earlier in the conference that spoke about making the appeal a certain way, you know? And just saying to people, like your — your ticket donation goes a long way. And then the other thing we need to do is make it easy. How can we make it so they can just like go to a site, click a button, and then we just know? And even if we're handling all of it manually, they didn't have to pick up the phone, wait on hold, do anything like that. It's just done. And so that's something I'm trying to think through too.

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ERIC: Well, along the scientists sort of gets back into the membership side of things. If you're looking for another example, actually quite different price point, is Phoenix Theater's membership model. It's about — Kate, I think it's 35, 39 dollars a month, something in that range. They tried to actually mimic their subscription package dollar size. But I bring it up because of what you just mentioned about the calling and, you know, making it easy for people to exchange or use or turn back their tickets.

[0:50:21.1]

When they launched their membership program, one of the things they had with it was a concierge style phone number that you could call. And they put it out there and nobody used it. It was super weird. They thought, wouldn't everyone want that? And they started asking their members why they weren't using it. And it was, a, their membership skews younger. And folks were saying, "I don't want to have to call anybody. Like, a concierge line actually is like, ugh, are you kidding me? But what I want is the website to allow me to do everything you promised that I should be able to do with exchanges and getting tickets and whatnot."

So as we think about these programs growing, or just even finding more ways for people to turn in their tickets or exchange them or whatnot, do we have the infrastructure in place that meets what our customers want at the same time? Super interesting. When they — when we found that piece of data out of the — phone, what, ugh, was super interesting. I know there were a couple more questions back with — David, behind you. Yeah.

CHRIS ANDERSON: Thank you. Good morning. My name is Chris Anderson. I'm from the Richmond Symphony. These are really interesting conversations. And I think along the lines of what you just said, I'm curious about each of the organizations, for these programs, whether it's moving seats or membership, there's a lot of moving, you know, information around. So I'm curious about what CRMs your — your organizations are using and what email management systems when it relates to either email automation, or, you know, a customer portal where they're making these changes. What systems are you using to make that happen?

[0:52:01.8]

SPEAKER: So for emails, we use digital, and we do a lot of segmenting. So whenever we just want to talk to members, we only send to members. Same with subscribers and any other of our groups. We don't do full sends, not much. And we also use Spectrix. So Spectrix has allowed us to tag people and

allowed us to track the numbers of, you know, who's reserving and who's buy-ing tickets and stuff like that.

SPEAKER: So we're part of a consortium that uses Tessitura as our ticketing system, and CRM, and we've been with them for a very long time. And our email service is Word Fly. Serves us okay. You know, plugs in, right? But a lot of this is what you put into it, too. There's a lot of manuals and just like planning and strategizing around everything. And then from just a communication perspective, certainly for rescale and renaming, there's a lot of direct mail that has to go out too, you know? To folks. They just need to see it, and then see it again, and then see it again.

With our first rescale last season, sending out that early messaging actually helped us get a lot earlier renewal too. So it was like, ugh, I don't want to talk about it, I don't want to tell anybody about this, they're going to be so mad. And people did call in, and you had some squeaky wheels. But what was really nice is a lot of people saw that and said, oh, that's cool. I'm glad they're doing that. And then they just went and renewed early. So there's some benefit to it. A lot of work. I'd be happy to talk through everything we did.

ERIC: If you're going to take one of those on, a rescale, having the communications plan that helps manage the expectation for where your customers may end up having their seats moved to, or that different price points, especially the people who know your maps really well. I like that seat back there that's always at that price point. And then it changes. Get ahead of that. Understanding what that communication plan needs to be that walks alongside of the change in the scale plan can be super helpful. And your box office will be so happy to have a plan like that, because it gives them the tools and the resources they need to help address any of those questions that will come up.

[0:54:09.1]

KEVIN: Kevin from Lincoln Symphony right down the road from Josh in Lincoln. Question for Arkansas. With the membership and relating the subscribers who don't come. We find that a lot of our subscribers that don't attend are really, really, really longtime subscribers. And I think they kind of view the subscription almost as a donation, right? They kind of — that's their — that's the way they've supported the symphony for 40 years, and that's the way they're going to continue it. Did you market the subscription as a way for those folks to kind of continue supporting the orchestra, almost thinking like an NPR sustaining member type push? And if you did, did you see any take on that?

ELISHA: Just to repeat the question. Do we still advertise our subscription to our long time —?

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KEVIN: Do you advertise the membership to your maybe lapsed or not — not lapsed, but not attending subscribers?

ELISHA: So we kind of do a little bit of both. So first with our lapsed subscribers, we send them a subscription — the subscription package. We want them back as a subscriber. And we go through a few waves of that. And if they don't respond to that, then we introduce membership, because maybe that could be just a bit cheaper for them. And it's just an easy way for them to get back into the hall. And then with our current members, if we see members who are reserving a lot of tickets, we give them a subscription package deal. So we're actually trying that out right now. We're giving members the option to become a subscriber because of how much they were reserving. And we're basically saying, like, you can just have your favorite seat forever, for the whole — you know, for the whole year. So we utilize both at the same time.

[0:55:52.3]

DAN: Hi, I'm Dan from Nashville Symphony. I just want to first say congratulations to all three symphonies. It sounds like you have some really great success stories, and it was awesome to hear about it. I wanted to ask about how you're segmenting age. Like, are you asking for people's birth year? How are you getting that data and then using it? Because I'm really interested in segmenting by, you know, age group, and, you know, strategizing around content there. And I'm just wondering if maybe the folks at TRG, or any of you guys, can share about how you're capturing age, and what you're doing with that.

SPEAKER: So the study that TRG ran on our ticket data, you know, goes through a process that, you know, obviously is probably more like on the Nielsen level of algorithm, right? So it lets us know whether we're moving in the right direction, and kind of gives us the idea of whether a certain series or singles or subs. Because we have such a large amount of data, I think that helps. But when it comes to communicating directly to people of a certain age, we do not — we do not ask that question. We don't know specifically what age folks are. We have to use the right channels for the right messages. I think that's a piece of it.

Although repurposing things for different channels also seems to work really well too, because some — some messages do resonate across different generations. And I think one way that, you know, we do it and we sort of trick the system, is we know how long you've been subscribing and how long you've been coming. Because we've been using the same database for a long time. And so we can just — if you've been with us for a long, long time, we're going to talk to you a certain way. If you've always responded to direct mail, we're going to continue to send you direct mail. And we'll probably

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make the language make sense for that too and be more straight-forward like we would have in traditional times. That's what we do. I don't know if you have another —

[0:57:56.4]

ELISHA: Yeah, that's fine. So we have a data center that we use, and that's how we're able to pull the data and like their demographics and stuff like that. And we're able to pull certain lists that we want. Like, we want people who attended this specific concert, or we want people who are from this neighborhood by zip code or whatever. So that's how we're able to segment and pull those lists for our emails, and even for like our text message system.

KATE: There are a variety of techniques that you can use. And some of it depends on where you're located. Because there are different regulations even by state as well as by country. So data appends, which both of them mentioned are one way to do it, that uses consumer data and census data here in the US to append age to household data using name and address. Other — I do have an orchestra right now who's in Canada, where that is not an option. And so we've been using their rapidly growing under 35 ticket programs to gather birth year.

And we haven't observed that demographic data changes how they behave in terms of ticket messaging, but we are seeing evidence that their age data changes which messages they respond to in donation behaviors. So I have another client who's experimenting with age-based messaging variation on their meta-ads. And again, we have not seen that generational messaging changes performance in ticket sales ads. We are seeing it changes performance in fundraising asks. So it's something to think about and experiment with as you think about your objectives.

ERIC: Just to build a little bit of one of these just said about data center. It's this tool we have that — to Kate's point, because of regulations in different states, it doesn't do this in all of them. But in most states in the US, if you use it, you can get on the fly demographic data about any list that you load into it. So then that's one of the ways to just get it on a constant basis. And it's a pretty affordable tool. I think \$2,000 annually to get that data for any of what you're loading into that. Happy to talk with folks about it afterwards. But Kate, if you don't mind, you shared this yesterday, and not everybody at that presentation was in the room. The Minnesota Orchestra data you all shared about imagery in ads, yeah.

[1:00:41.2]

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KATE: Yeah. So we have been on a journey with subscription advertising in the Minnesota Or-chestra on multiple vectors. One of the things that we've experimented with is the age of the people in our photography. I was joking, there's like a generation more on the staff between the Gen Xers the Millennials, and the Gen Zers about who — what is young. And they seem to think that like you either show people who are 25 or 65. And so I pushed them to say, could we — could we maybe try some ages in the middle there?

And we actually just did an ad, I got data like yesterday, from them that the ads that are featur-ing people who probably look somewhere between the ages of 40 and 55 have been some of the best performing ads of the entire campaign with every demographic.

ERIC: Gen X! Gen X! Indeed.

[LAUGHTER]

KATE: Yeah, everybody — it's orchestras. Everybody under 60 is young.

ERIC: Absolutely. Sixty's like — is the new 20 in the orchestra sector.

KATE: Yeah, sixty is middle aged.

ERIC: Absolutely. Yeah, question over here again.

[1:02:04.6]

SARAH: Representing Bangor, Maine again. Kate, I wondered, early on you talked about the front of house experience in that, you know, the decision making for your next buy is even be-fore you walk in the hall. So we rented our space, and we have a great relationship with them. But we're — we're a small staff. So we just rely on them. And I'm just wondering, are there be-yond — you suggested using survey feedback. But maybe are there some other tools and sug-gestions you have for strengthening that relationship and — and your — our brand? And have they been really good representatives of our brand and how do we want things done?

KATE: Yeah, that's challenging. How many of you rent your venues? Yeah. So most of you. I think the first thing to do is — they are partners with you. And sometimes we're — we forget that they have needs or frictions or complaints too. So sometimes — the first thing I would suggest is spend some time listening to what their problems and challenges are, and where maybe you need to — or could adjust some things to help them. That generally sets a different tone than when you come back and say, by the way, our patrons would like you to say hello.

So first, show up and be an equal partner and, and take consideration for what their staff find challenging as seriously as you would like them to take your concerns. It goes a long way. I find cupcakes are also helpful. You know, who doesn't love getting fed a cupcake? The second thing I would really think about is how can you employ patrons who love you to be ambassadors for you? We work with a theater in Georgia that create — had a huge volunteer team who was tired of stuffing envelopes, but really wanted to do things. And so they turned them into the Springer Opera House ambassadors. And so they literally — they have pins that designate them as ambassadors, and they actually go through the lobby and greet people, say hello, build conversations. If you're a new patron, they have M&Ms and drink tickets they can give you to welcome you for your first time.

ERIC: I want some drink tickets and M&Ms. That sounds awesome.

KATE: Man, and there is no place more welcoming than a small town in the South. So, you know, I think there's ways you can think about, what are the other resources and people you can tap into to build connection, both with the venue, but also your patron base. These folks love you, and often want to know how they can help. And something as simple and connective as — greeting people really changes the dynamic in the hall, right? From a, they're just going to shush me, to, oh, they're happy I'm here.

ERIC: If any of you were following pre — actually, during the pandemic as well, the culture track studies that were going out. One of the big correlations they saw was simply someone saying hello to you when you come in the venue really lifts the retention rate. So even a simple hello goes such a long way. So having more people who can put those hellos out there makes a big difference. We have about five more minutes. So I think one or two questions, maybe more if they're out there.

ROBERT REED: Robert Reed for the Madison Symphony. Can you just go a little bit more about the pluses and minuses of greeting from the stage? You're — we're talking about a greeting in the lobby. What is the good and the bad from actually having a greeting from the stage?

[1:06:17.0]

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KATE: I think there's never a bad for having a greeting from the stage. Greet as — who — greet as early and often as you can. I think the challenge is that I might have interacted with a number of people before I got to my seat and before that greeting from the stage came, that may not have been as positive. I had a client once that I was a subscriber at also. And at the time, I was probably in my mid to late — I was in my late twenties. I came from the orchestra. I was wear-ing a suit. I thought I looked nice and presentable.

But I got to the door and showed my ticket, which was a specially printed subscriber ticket. Should have cued someone in that like, hey, I'm not just a single ticket buyer. And the usher read me the riot act about cellphone usage in the hall. And this is an organization I love. I had subscribed there before they were a client. They were a client. So I knew people who worked there. And it just put such a sour taste in my mouth about that performance.

I actually don't remember the performance. But gosh, do I remember being yelled at about — or scolded about my cellphone usage. So they might have greeted me from the stage, but I don't remember that because of how I was treated before I even got into the venue. So thinking about how you set the tone, and where are those points of interaction before they get into their seat, and making sure that it's interpreted in the right way. I felt like I was singled out because I was younger, because I didn't hear anybody in front of me get that speech.

[1:08:10.9]

And if we think about inclusivity in the hall, it's really difficult to tell the difference between an usher who's just rude to every single person in the line and an usher who's treating you with mi-cro aggressions for any one of the various minorities that you may identify as. So really consid-er — yes, greet them from the stage, absolutely. But really consider how you are making sure you've set that same welcoming tone that you have for the stage from — from the very begin-ning.

ERIC: Any — Elisha or Josh?

JOSH: I think that when I'm at a concert, and there's that welcome from the conductor, it makes a big difference. Obviously, with guests is a little bit different. You don't always have that same control. But our music director — if you read a little bit of our surveys, as I do, some people think it's a little too much. But those are the folks that have been coming for 20 or 30 years, and they're not going anywhere. And I think from the folks that are new, this — it just makes it feel like, oh, okay, I'm

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supposed to be here. This is great. So personally, I love the idea of some welcome from the stage. And I think if it's from the music director or the conductor specifically, that's — that's the big thing.

It's you don't want your CEO always coming out there welcoming everyone. That isn't going to do the same thing as like, hey. Because you know, you go to a concert, and if they play straight ahead on a rock concert, and then they don't say a thing, no chitchat at all, some folks are going to be like, yes, but 95 percent of them are going to wonder, why didn't they address me? Like, what's going on?

ERIC: Well, I think there's — just one more moment about it. Put yourself in your audience's position rather than yours. Is the stage pitch self-serving for you or is it something to celebrate who's come into the hall? So we have clients who do things like, we're going to recognize our 20-year subscribers today. Everybody stand up. Or we're recognizing our first timers. Or things that make the people who are in the venue feel good about being there rather than listening to a whole litany of information about what the organization needs.

[1:10:14.8]

That's a very different way to think about how to welcome. And short and sweet. Short and sweet and welcoming would-be recommendation. We are at eight — I'm on East Coast time on my laptop, or other time zone. We are at ten-fifteen. So I think we're at the moment here. So thank you all so much. I'm just going to put this back up for a second. Like I said, happy to puzzle through strategies with you all. I'll leave my information there. Feel free to shoot me an email if you'd like to set something up. We'll hang around for a little bit if you have any other additional questions.

SPEAKER: Great. Thank you so much, Eric. Thank you for the Charleston and Omaha and Arkansas. I'm so thrilled to have all of you hear. I'm reminded — what's the largest brick and mortar retailer in the United States? Walmart. Who is in the front door of every Walmart? A greeter. And so I was reminded in that conversation of making people feel welcome. Also think of Maya Angelou's quote, and I will get it quite wrong, but it's something to the effect of, people will forget what you do, but they'll remember how you make them feel.

And so I think how we make our audiences feel is how we will get them to come back. Again, thrilled to have you here for our last day of the conference. You have constituency meetings coming up next, and then please stay for our final closing luncheon at twelve-forty-five. And we'll look forward to seeing you there. Thank you so much.

END OF TRANSCRIPT

520 8th Avenue, Suite 2005, New York, NY 10018

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