

Donna Walker-Kuhne

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DONNA WALKER-KUHNE: So now we'll talk about some external opportunities to build our audiences. But I cannot underscore the value of what Dr. Cooper has said. You know, I've been doing this for a long time. Where I see success is where the organization has invested in building relationships, has invested in the staff being engaged, has invested in changing the culture of how they view the constituents that they are trying to engage, and what makes that long lasting, as opposed to, we're doing this quick production of *Porgy and Bess*, and we need to make sure we have the Black community there. Can you please just do some things?

I've been asked to do some of those things. But that maybe is a band-aid. And I think we're beyond band-aids now. I'm interested in institutional building that's long term and becomes part of the fabric of how you do business. So that's what I'd like us to focus on, moving forward. So just some quick definitions so we're all on the same page. We talk about audience development. So for years, you know, audience development and community engagement have been used interchangeably, but they're actually different.

And the key difference is audience development is designed to sell tickets. It is a transactional experience. It is targeting a specific demographic for specific event for them to either purchase tickets or come to a free event. But the metrics, what makes it a success, is the number of tickets you sold to the target demographic. It is transactional. Of course, there's strategies that we use. Absolutely. And I'll talk about some of those. Strategies that we use to achieve that goal. But the outcome, that's what's important. And that is the transactional component.

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And so just looking at what does this mean. I think it's the cultivation and development of long-term relationships, so that they're rooted in the philosophy and culture of the organization. So that your community, the people that you want to engage don't just come maybe for that one time. When I was at the Public Theater, what I felt was a metric of our success is when the communities of color started to come because it was at the Public. And then it became secondary to what was on stage. So that took time. Everything I'm describing takes time. Years. It takes investment on multiple levels. But it absolutely can happen.

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I'm also — you know, this process of engaging, educating our communities. So we make assumptions sometimes. And one of the major challenges I had in many of the institutions I've worked with is this internal assumption that everybody knows what we're doing. Of course, we all know what opera is. Everyone is familiar with Chopin and Bach, all these different artists. Maybe, maybe not. And so building a way to educate that is not dumbing down, but in fact, is a very intelligent and creative way, speaks to Dr. Cooper's point about thinking big and fostering an environment where the staff can contribute to, how would we do this? What would be a way to celebrate where our communities are at this point, and how we can make sure they're comfortable and find this information and material and the performances accessible?

So that's just another component of how we build. As I mentioned before, keeping in mind the transactional component. That's how we measure success, primarily when we're building up diverse audiences, and what that looks like when they attend. So these are just some suggestions that each of you could consider when you think about building diverse audiences. These are things you build into the fabric of who you are. The internal alignment, onstage representation. Many times I hear from — because I'm always asking people, I'm always doing my own surveys, informal, asking different groups that I'm with, “So did you go to see this?” “Well, I didn't really see myself there.” You know, my company is often retained to do surveys to find out why aren't these communities of color coming.

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And it's usually one or two of these reasons. Representation. Meeting the community where they are. This expectation that everyone has to come to your building. Well, can you come out and play with me too, you know? Can you bring your work to where we are? Also the partnerships for me, that's my favorite. I love partnerships. I think that's what roots the effort. So that looks at what is the mutual benefit to both of us. Okay, you're engaging me to come and see this production. How does this benefit my community or me personally? And so you think about that. That becomes part of the design.

And then what does the messaging look like? You know, what does it actually look like? And then what does it sound like? And is it something that's engaging and inviting? These are things that we think about that we engage our marketing department in as well, as well as our development department. This work is so much based on institutional involvement. And when each department understands their role in diversifying audiences is when you start to see 100. And for me, 100 is all in. That's when you start to see the results that we're really looking for.

But relegating this effort to just one or two people, very difficult. I think it is almost impossible in today's times. Because as we know, our world is constantly changing. And where we are right now in our world, with, you know, so much controversy, so much differing opinions, what unifies, I believe it's the art that unifies us, where we can all, at least for two hours, look at the stage or look at a beautiful work of art and say, wow, that's really interesting. And so for that — those two hours, we can transcend our differences.

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So we're not trying to change people. What we're doing is serving the community with the art that we love. Be very clear on our motivations, because that affects everything that we do. And then, you know, building relationships. So this is the commitment. It takes time to go visit different organizations, and talk with leaders, and say, this is something we really feel important. What do you think is the best way to do this? And I know some of you do this, because I know some of you who are here. But for everyone that's here, building relationships is key. Someone mentioned trust. So trust comes because you actually took the time to ask me, what's my opinion, or what's the best time of year? We've been hearing from a number of different community groups, for Black History Month, we don't want to do something that's focused on the Black community because it marginalizes us, and it's just for those 28 days we should pay attention to Black culture.

So a number of organizations have shifted. I remember working with George Wolfe, and he would say, "We're Black 12 months out of the year. Why would we just focus on one month?" And so it's listening and finding out what makes sense in the different communities that you work with. And then, what is the audience experience? What actually happens when you come through the door? Who's welcoming your constituents? So you've got the team, they're out in the community, they built these partnerships, distributed materials, have events. They walk in the door. What happens the moment they walk in the door? You are completely responsible for that. Who's welcoming them? Has the staff been apprised of your goals?

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Again, back to institutional building. Does the house staff understand the power of their smile, the power of looking directly in the eyes of these diverse audiences, perhaps many for the first time? That has everything to do with their experience. It won't matter what they saw on stage, because they felt unwelcomed when they came in. And I hear these stories, unfortunately, often, and I've had some of my own, some as recently as last year. And so it's something we have to pay attention to. What is the audience experience? Great. So we had a wonderful show, everything was great.

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There's so many things we can do to welcome new audiences. When you have groups, you can give them welcome gifts. I'm sure you've done this. The follow-up. So important. Call the next day. What did you think? What did your group say? Sending out audience surveys. Tell us what your opinion is. That same cultivation we give to donors we give to our new audiences. If you can think about it in that way, investing time and resources, then we start to see an amazing return.

And then this whole idea about the third space, because many of your orchestras and organizations are in a building, whether you're renting, you own. But how else can the community be involved in your space besides the performance or besides the workshop? Where can they come in and play? Where can they come and sit down with their laptop and work on the computer? Or it's on their phones. Or just sit and look. I was at a performance not too long ago, and I came early. I came a day before to pick up my tickets. And when I walked in, I was so pleasantly surprised. I saw people hanging out, you know, just talking with their friends.

I said, ah, third space. There's a space for work. There's a space, you know, that we go to, you know, to focus on specific things. But then there's a space that doesn't have a particular identity. That's the third space. Think about how your facilities can also be open to the community. Of course, that's a budget question. You got to make sure it's staffed, all of those things. But even if they come in to use the bathrooms, they came into the space. That can demystify crossing that line, getting into that — the door the first time.

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So I have two case studies that I'll go through very quickly. One is in the catalyst guide, and I like this one. I like all of them actually. I pointed out the Virginia Symphony Orchestra, because you know, when I had the pleasure, you know, being able to meet and hearing from Nicki Thorpe, and I was just really impressed with her passion and commitment. This does require someone to drive the initiatives. But the more support they get, then the more effective they can be. And her passion was amazing, and going beyond actually what the job requires. But take into consideration all of these important tactics, you know?

So looking at year-round programming. What are the cultural observances that we can do? So we have this production that engages a diverse community, great, our lens are focused on that. But then there's the other 11 months out of the year. How else do you remain relevant to these communities that we want to target? Do they only hear from you when you're doing a production that we think they may be interested in? I've had people tell me, "Stop curating my experience. You don't know what I might be interested, tell me everything, and I will decide."

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But that point of entry is usually something that was familiar, something that they knew, or they — became accessible to them. So that makes sense. But it's important to also make sure that we're not just limited in how we expose them to your various events. And so these are some of the things that I think Nicki pointed out. And of course, you read — you can read the full report in the catalyst guide, but I did want to point out that I admired how she was being very strategic and engaging on a — on a long-term basis, her targeted demographic. I encourage you to consider that as well.

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Another case study that I worked on with the Mile Long Opera, which we did — it was a few years ago in New York on the High Line, which is a park that's — elevated park. And my firm was contacted to really try to make a diverse experience. And if you're familiar with the opera, the Mile Long Opera was a story about what happens in New York at seven p.m.. New York at seven p.m. Lots of things. And so the score was written to kind of depict that. And it was very unique. The audience walked the opera, because it was in a park.

So you would — there were clusters of singers that were singing the same line. So you go to this group, and you'll hear that phrase, and you'll go to the next group. And so it was a very unique approach, but actually quite accessible to people perhaps who had not been to an opera. And so what my team did, you know, working along with other teams as well, you know, we looked at this in a very broad base. Looking at partnerships, looking at advertising, paid advertising, by the way. I must say this, and not to insult anyone, but audience development costs, it has a budget, it needs to be in the institutional budget, because then it can have wings, then there's a possibility of activation.

But to just say, you know, we need to go and target some diverse audiences, that makes it very challenging. And so with this production, we had a dedicated budget for paid advertising. We had an excellent press team. And so when you have all these elements coming together, and the — many of the artists who were singing were also very diverse, some professionals, some were community-based. Putting all those elements together enabled this to be a very successful endeavor that looked at opera in a different way, that brought in people who certainly had not been, and that could continue to build upon.

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So that's kind of an overview of audience development. And then I just want to talk a little bit about community engagement. And it became very clear to me why community engagement was so important. I have been at New Jersey Performing Arts Center now for 13 years. I started as vice

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president of marketing, and then I created the country's second community engagement department in a performing arts center. And then, now I consult with them. When I built the community engagement department, it was because our efforts in audience development were not as robust as I felt they could be. Part of it was because the marketing team didn't have the time to really build those kinds of relationships and activate these different strategies.

And so I suggested if we could have a department that could focus exclusively on taking the work to where people live, then we could start to see more traction, and that's exactly what we did. And so that has been, again, another transformative experience, because we're bringing art to the people, as opposed to expecting you to buy your ticket and come see what I've already produced. There is a difference. And we'll talk about how that can be a bridge. I think community engagement is an excellent bridge from audience development to building more of a long-term relationship with the community. Because, in addition to what you have on your stages, you're saying we're also bringing these programs to you. Distinguished from arts education. Arts education, this is what they do. Of course, they're in the schools, they're in youth programs.

So we're talking more about adults buying tickets and adults discovering, what does art look and feel like, where I am, where I live. So how does that actually, you know, play out? I think the root of this is access. When we talk about community engagement, what we're doing is building more access to the arts. So as opposed to everyone having to come to buy a ticket, this is great. Actually, I go out my front door, and I see them outside doing dance workshops. I think I want to join in that, that looks interesting. Or, you know, I love jazz. And, you know, maybe it's intimidating to go to a big theater, 3,000, 4,000 seats to see a jazz performance. But a jazz jam in my local club with about 80 or 90 people, that's a way to create access, you know, to that.

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And so we've developed, you know, 200 community engagement events that are free, that we take to the community, none of them happen on the campus. And the whole purpose of them is to create access to the work that we do. Where people feel safe, and where they feel respected. And know that this is a process. Nothing happens overnight. You have to first build a team, then you have to figure out, okay, what is it that we can take? What is transportable? What can we build? And having those conversations. So that's the investment, I think, that we all have to make.

There's also a belief. I believe in having a philosophical foundation for everything that we do. And so where does this actually live? Absolutely, as Dr. Cooper, you know, articulated very clearly, this hits the bottom line. You know, absolutely. But how do we get there, I think, is how we believe in our

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purpose of being able to engage audiences and be able to create access to the arts. Where does it actually live, and how does it resonate? That all deals with building this culture of inclusion.

And so there's a lot of talk, you all know, about diversity, equity, and inclusion. You may think it's separate, but it actually is foundational to this work. And so the more that we invest in building cultures of inclusion, of respecting different cultures, honoring them in a consistent and predictable way, then that's how these communities and our audiences can discover, well, this is a place I want to go to all the time. I like it. I like the way they look; I like what it looks like and feels like. And so those are some of the — the, you know, opportunities.

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What we — I do want to distinguish is that community engagement is not a program. You know, it's not just this one thing that we do, but it is a multitude of various events, opportunities. It can be as simple as participating in the local street fair. It can be, you know, having your volunteers, and I understand you have a very robust volunteer group. It can be having them show up in places, distributing material. It can be participating in panel discussions. It can be many, many things. It doesn't always have to be event-based or even, you know, representing the work that you have. But it's being present, you know?

And so that makes people feel good. They're like, my symphony orchestra, they were at my church, and they saluted our choir, and they talked about how wonderful our choir sounds. Or maybe the orchestra says, well, you know what, we'd like to give a masterclass to your choir. You know, we — there's such a symbiotic relationship between the different types of music, we'll be happy to help you prepare for one of your upcoming concerts. What do you have that you can give and share? I think that's another way of building sustainability and not just looking at this as a one-shot deal. But how do we integrate this into how you do business and then what the other organizations might need?

Of course, I fully understand you're already overworked. I'll whisper the word underpaid. But you're definitely overworked. I know. But if this is what we want to accomplish, we have to find ways to expand. And that comes with thinking big. It all comes together. I also know that funders are particularly interested in how they can deepen their footprint in the community. And so when I started talking with our development department about the response we get from the community and what we're doing, they said, "Wow, this is great. We were just talking to a corporate sponsor, and they said, 'How else can we fund? You know, we've already funded your series, we already funded the creation of a new work, which is great. But what else can we do?'"

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And so you want to build a narrative around the work that you're doing towards community engagement. Start that now, so that you can articulate that, and development can pick up that thread, and bring in additional funding for you in surprising ways. And so now, I'm just going to do one more example of community — one example of committee engagement before Dr. Cooper comes back, and now you'll do a little bit of work. I think having advisors and ambassadors are two ways to start to build your community engagement work. Because they can inform you about what would be impactful, what would be something that would have a positive effect in your community.

So please don't assume that you know. Ask the people that we actually want to serve. I think also understanding that community engagement is not a sales effort, that it is building relationships, building awareness, and creating access. We need both. We need both to really be successful, to have a thriving arts organization. I think to really be — have the kind of movement and growth and our audiences that we're all yearning for. Just one example of community engagement that I constantly love. When I was — when we first started in NJPAC, we were trying to figure out how could we promote our dance series more effectively, because dance was just — the sales for tickets were not as strong as we felt they should be.

And so we said, well, let's create dance in your community. And so we did that. We started building dance workshops in various communities throughout Newark, New Jersey. That program still exists, and we have been able to build dance audiences, because people actually were able to take the dance class in their community center, in their church. And we use music from — from various productions that were going to happen on our stage, as well as invited choreographers, you know, to help lead those dance workshops. So there was a local connection as well.

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And we can do the very same with the orchestras, certainly with music. And so I just want to close this section by talking about the importance of both audience development. Absolutely transactional. We'll be able to measure that with our sales. Community engagement. We've taken our work out into the community, we built these long-term relationships, listened to our community, honored various cultural traditions, and so that we see a very healthy arts and cultural constituency. So now it's time for you to do some work.

END OF TRANSCRIPT

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