

# Attracting new audiences

Based on a research study by Bob Harlow

Audience development and engagement have recently become ‘buzz words’ within the Australian performing arts sector, influencing the way we think about and shape our projects, and now a key element in most funding applications. While the arts sector is witnessing a notable groundswell of audience development/engagement programs, not all arts organisations are expert in this field.

Reaching, attracting and engaging new audiences often means venturing into uncharted territory and requires a meticulous and well-planned approach as a one-sized-fits-all strategy does not work. One of the critical aspects for a successful audience-building program is AUDIENCE RESEARCH.

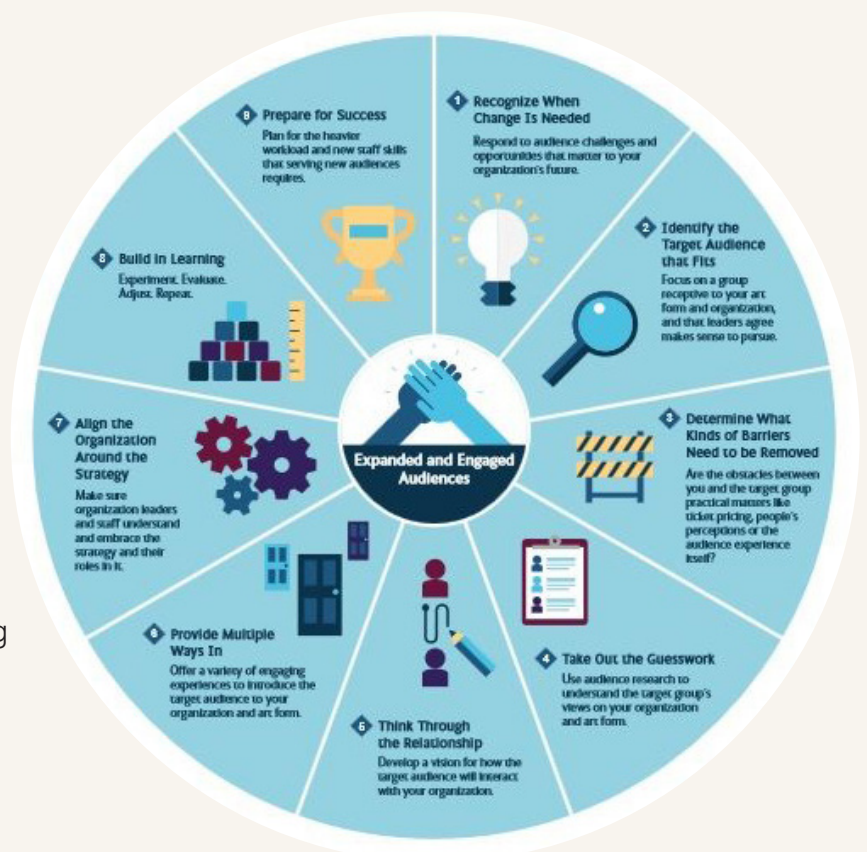
A leading voice in this field is the internationally renowned US Market Researcher Bob Harlow, who is also the lead author of [The Wallace Foundation publication series, Wallace Studies in Building Arts Audiences](#). Between 2006 and 2012 he took part in the Wallace Foundation program that funds 54 arts organizations in the US to develop and test approaches for expanding audiences. Ten of these case studies have formed [The Road to Results – Effective Practices for Building Arts Audiences](#) research led by Bob Harlow.

Through these case studies, he has identified some key principles that contribute to a successful audience development strategy (see graphic below), which we’ve summarized for you in this article.

## Embrace audience research

First of all and most importantly, audience research is essential in order to guarantee a successful audience-building program and should be the backbone of your strategy. As much as market research might sound boring for the vast majority, so too is the perception of audience research, until you meet statistician Bob Harlow.

Often deemed expensive, time consuming and tangential to the ‘real’ work, this initial step is not taken seriously or given enough attention and resources according to Harlow, and becomes the responsibility of the marketing and/or the development departments only.



## Engage the whole organisation

Audience development isn't solely the job of the marketing and development departments in your organisation. Not only does this enterprise need to be aligned with your organisations' missions, values, resources and work, but it's also imperative to make sure that everyone, across all departments, embrace the strategy and is involved in it to yield positive results.

*“For a strategy to be supported and acted upon, it needs to live in the hearts and minds of each employee”*

- Willie Pieteron, Professor and Business Leader, Columbia Business School -

From the management team to the operation department and the front of house staff, everybody in your organisation need to understand what their roles and responsibilities are to support the audience development strategy, and grasp its full implication for the organisation.

Some staff members might struggle with this new initiative and find themselves disempowered not knowing how to serve an audience they know nothing about.

“A solution might be to hire an outside facilitator to train staff in understanding multicultural perspectives and interacting with people of diverse backgrounds” said Harlow.

Audience research is all about identifying your target audience and finding out about their interests, lifestyle and general attitudes towards the art and cultural involvement. “So, rather than guess, go to the source” said Harlow.

To do so, he recommends that you take the whole team and go visit your local community, meet with community organisations and religious institutions to identify key people in your community who can become your advocates.

## Focus groups

Another effective way to conduct your audience research is to use focus groups. This method offers many advantages, one being very low-cost.

According to Bob Harlow, focus groups offer a safe place for people to express themselves with a few simple rules to follow to guarantee the best outcomes: the group should consist of a maximum of 6-8 people, demographically similar (same age group, same background, etc.), who huddle for 90min-2hrs each.

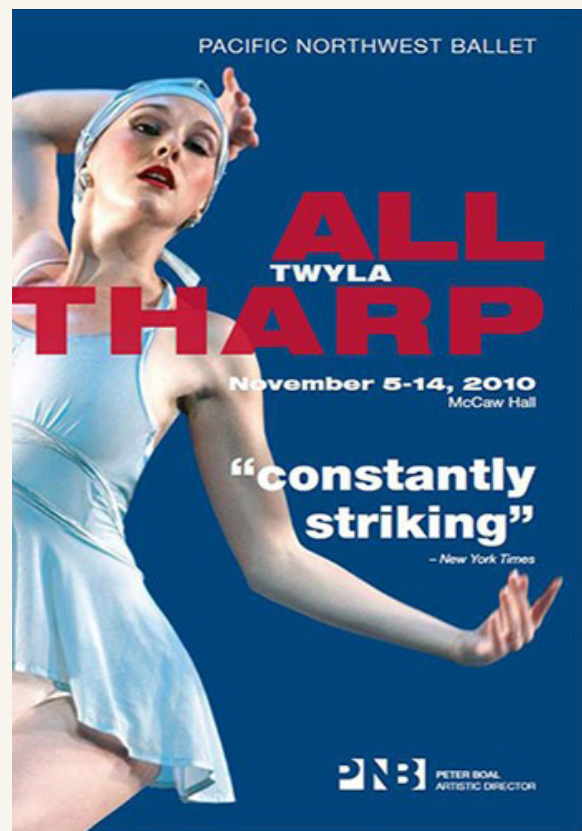
During these sessions, concentrate on getting to know the participants, ask them how they perceive your organisation and the art form(s) that you present (if you are a venue) or produce (if you are an arts organisation), or what they think they know about you. Find aspects of your organisation that excite them and invite them to review your website, brochures and marketing materials and to tell you if they appeal to them.

## Marketing tips

Bob Harlow’s research, in particular the one with the Pacific Northwest Ballet, revealed for instance that young people need to feel emotions in the promotional materials. If you are a dance company, or if you are presenting a dance piece, he would recommend using “close-ups of dancers with clear facial expressions emotions associated with their characters rather than shots of dancers that demonstrate their technical prowess but fail to connect on an emotion level”.



*Before Focus Groups*



*After Focus Groups*

Behind-the-scenes videos also proved to be very popular amongst young people. They give them a glimpse of what they will see on stage and the chance to acquaint themselves with the art form.

For some other groups, it might be a matter of changing the language in your marketing copy using more action words, especially if you are offering hands-on workshops as part of your program.

Also, make sure pricing information is featured in all your marketing collaterals as not including it could lead people to make the assumption that tickets are expensive and out of their reach.

## Identify and pull down the barriers

These sessions will also help you detect and break down the barriers that stand between them and your organisation. These barriers fall into three categories:

- **Perceptual barriers:** audience who believe the art form has nothing to offer them or think that they would feel out of place in a venue such as an opera house, theatre, gallery or museum. These are often people who are *disinclined* and have little interest in the arts. Targeting them will *diversify* your audiences.
- **Practical barriers:** these are financial and time constraints that prevent new audiences from attending your event or sign in to your program, and is often the result of a lack of money, time or transportation that keeps them away. These people are more *inclined* to participate and probably have a lot in common with your current audience. Targeting them would *broaden* an organization's audience because they are similar to existing audience members.
- **Experiential barriers:** this relates more to your *current audience*, or people who already made the effort to attend your events but did not have a satisfying experience. So make them feel welcome and provide them with the best possible experience to *deepen* their experience.

TARGET AUDIENCE	AUDIENCE-BUILDING GOAL	RELEVANT FACTORS
Disinclined	Diversify	Perceptual
Inclined	Broaden	Practical
Current audience	Deepen	Experiential

Through his research Harlow also found out that often price is not a barrier.

“What stops newcomers from purchasing a ticket is the fact that they are not familiar enough with the art form to decide which show they might like to see” said Harlow.

## Offer getaway activities to acquaint newcomers

In order to familiarise your target audience with what you do, and to embolden them to come and see your show(s), Harlow suggests that you create multiple ways in.

“Some organisations let new audiences get acquainted with their art form informally through low-key situations that fit their lifestyles or inclinations to participate. Other groups put their art in a context that is familiar to newcomers, in part to give them confidence that they would be able to appreciate it” said Harlow.

“Newcomers are unlikely to sign up for a membership but may be open to sampling and exploring the organisations that do not entail a big commitment” said audience-building practitioner and expert Donna Walker-Kuhne .



That doesn't mean that you need to change the art you present in order to please your target audience, but you can expand the work you present to be more inclusive.

So what sort of programs can you offer to attract newcomers? Here are a few ideas to start with:

### Family audience

- Organise events that would appeal to both adults and children;
- Offer abridged versions of full-length performances that will better suits families;
- Value-add to your programs by offering family-oriented workshops before and/or after your shows;
- Create a family friendly environment.
- Partner with preschool directors to bring communities of parents and their per-schoolers together;

### Young people (12-20yrs)

- Offer \$5 tickets to rehearsal previews and invite them to make and share behind-the-scenes videos on social media;
- Offer "2-FOR-1" tickets to encourage young people to bring a friend;
- Reserve prime seats for them so they feel welcome. This will also avoid that all young people coagulate on the back rows and disturb the rest of the audience by making noise.
- Invite them to a free workshop with the artists prior to attending a show;
- Ask them to review your show and to share it on social media, and invite them to a creative writing workshop beforehand to help them do so.

### Young adults

- Introduce more social elements to your events, such as pop-up bars, quirky venues, after-hours "social" events, immersive performances or by inviting the audience to sit on the stage during the show;
- Offer a complimentary drink with any ticket purchased;

## Welcome Teens!

**Wondering who that young ballet-goer is, sitting in that seat next to you?** They could very well be a member of Seattle Center's Teen Tix program. Since the inception of this city-run arts access program for teenagers, Pacific Northwest Ballet has been a proud and passionate participant. Now in its sixth year of operation, Teen Tix provides Seattle-area teenagers with access to 37 arts organizations in an effort to engage young people in Seattle's vibrant cultural scene. Teen Tix membership enables teenagers to purchase day-of-show tickets to music, dance, theater, and arts events for only \$5.

For more information, visit  
Seattle Center's Teen Tix webpage  
at [www.seattlecenter.com/teentix...](http://www.seattlecenter.com/teentix...)  
or just lean over and ask the teen  
sitting next to you.

*"Immersive theatre is becoming more popular with millennials because they take selfies, they put themselves in videos that they upload to YouTube and Instagram. So making them a part of the show is a role that they embrace and are already prepared for."*

Amanda Berg Wilson, Director, The Wild Party

*Above: this leaflet is placed in every Pacific Northwest Ballet programs welcoming young patrons and, importantly, explaining to the rest of the audience why their presence is essential to the company's future.*

## Culturally diverse audience

- Offer 'outreach programs', also called 'off-site programs' by bringing your art form directly to the community through a mobile studio, outdoor workshops, invitations to perform/present at community events, etc.
- Make them feel welcome to your venue and pay attention to details like signages/programs available in their language, and having non-alcoholic beverages including coffee and tea at the bar.
- Many new migrants work in restaurants, so offering a program on Monday evenings when the majority of them have the night off might be wise;

## Building in learning

Not all the initiatives will be successful, and you might witness some hit and miss results, but pilot tests or "soft launches" of programs will help lower the risk of spending too much time and resources until you can see evidence that some work and gain traction.

To ensure that you are on track with your audience development strategy and that you are attracting the targeting audience, it's important to collect visitor's feedback. This will help you assess and evaluate your strategy, and diagnose any problems. Sometimes changes or improvements can be logistical (reducing waiting time, etc.) and are easy to make in order to pursue your program and achieve great results.

But remember, you are in for the long haul, and as Bob Harlow says "People don't become devotees overnight, it's a slow process" and adds "it takes time to learn how to work with a new audience and, in turn, for a new audience to see an institution as a place where it belongs."