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Let the Music Play: Using Community Engagement to Develop a New Sustainable Audience

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Let the Music Play:

Using Community Engagement to Develop a New Sustainable Audience

By: Leslie Wilcher

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Introduction

The Kishwaukee Symphony Orchestra (KSO) is a nonprofit orchestra in DeKalb, Illinois. As an intern, I have learned how important the arts and humanities sectors are to nonprofits and the community. Since last fall, the biggest concern of this orchestra has been declining attendance. This is something that many organizations have been experiencing in the arts and humanities sector. Some orchestras are deciding to close for good due to money running out. This sector of nonprofits includes orchestras both visual and performance arts. Community members and engagement are the only way to bring awareness and entice a sustainable audience. Losing an organization in the arts sector is a loss that will not be regained. This would also hurt the community, with loss of local jobs, sales taxes from tickets, and attraction to DeKalb County. Losing an organization like the KSO would affect future players, music education for Dekalb and Sycamore schools, and Northern Illinois University (NIU) students looking for a start in an orchestra. The musicians who already play with the orchestra and those NIU students receive who already play with the orchestra and those NIU students receiving stipends for playing with the orchestra. Those players who lose their jobs will now need jobs in an ever-narrowing market, which puts pressure on resources from human services nonprofits. So, how do we stop the closing of the orchestras? In my research, I am looking for this answer. Can the KSO use community engagement to build a more sustainable audience? It will take understanding what the sustainable community members want from the KSO. It will take change from the KSO to build the audience they want to attract. Finally, it will take the KSO time to educate and cultivate a sustainable audience. This is important; without a new audience, the KSO could shut down in the distant future. The following are some questions that will help guide me to understand how to grow an audience through community engagement.
1. What are the similarities and differences between community engagement and audience development?

2. What are the main reasons Symphony Orchestras are seeing a downturn in attendance?

3. Why do audiences go or not go to Symphony Orchestra concerts?

4. What do we do to retain the new audience?

5. What have other governments like Australia done to help symphonies grow sustainable audiences?

**Literature view**

What are the similarities and differences between community engagement and audience development?

Although these two would seem to be the same beast, they are not. A few differences separate them. Community engagement is: “Identifying and addressing what the community cares about. Doing things that really matter (e.g., activities focused on building better communities). Establishing long-term relationships and partnerships with other community groups. Working with community groups to plan and offer your programs and activities and sharing the control, acknowledgment, and proceeds.” (Borwick, 2012) Audience development is defined as: “audience development as taking a specific action to meet the needs of current and future audiences, and helping arts organizations develop relationships with the audience.” (Jiang, 423) Audience development is the starting point in building a relationship with new audience members. Community engagement makes the long-lasting bonds that keep and audience coming back. Differences were examined in the *Engagement Matters Art Journal* Blog by Doug
Borwick. Borwick breaks down the differences between the two concepts. Audience development has a shorter-term impact, next to community engagement, which is longer developed and involved. (Borwick, 2022) This argument can also be seen to use audience development to excite a new audience and community engagement to retain a sustained audience. These two concepts work in concert together. In the study, Ariel Zirulnick wrote that audience engagement and community engagement are separate but necessary for any arts organization to exist. (Zirulnick, 2022) Zirulnick writes about radio newsrooms and how they hired her to officiate the community engagement end of things, like talking to underserved communities to find out what matters to them. (Zirulnick, 2022) The digital team of the same newsroom is responsible for newsletter and social media disbursement. (Zirulnick, 2022) They work in unison to involve the audience in the newsroom to build a relationship with their audience. These pieces help with knowing the differences and how they can work together.

What are the main reasons Symphony Orchestras are seeing a downturn in attendance?

The reason for a downturn may be caused by internal problems that keep the audience from returning. These reasons are Bad marketing plans and insufficient technology are again revealed in concert attendance. Marketing is important; without technology, to spread your message and tell people about who you are and upcoming concerts and events. So again, these two reasons go hand in hand. There is a problem in this part of the theory when attaching it to the KSO. The technology in the age bracket we are looking at is not the problem, and marketing is not a problem that KSO has, as we will see from the results. Although the following part of Bedlam’s theory is most likely to fit. Outside reasons for dwindling audiences result from changes in the community. Changes can range from socio-political and/or socio-economic
factors, demographics, technological advancements, and different socializing methods. (Dalton, 2018) Dalton noted that the community attitudes had changed after community engagement efforts were initiated. (Dalton, 2018) They were more open, and the barriers were coming down. Bringing in the culture and giving a voice to the community allowed for a sustainable audience. These studies show how to tear down barriers and develop an audience through community engagement.

Why do we go or not go to Symphony Orchestra concerts?

Live music is a big draw for pop musicians. Concertgoers often go to live music events for not only the music. The top reasons for adults wanting to go to concerts are to socialize with family or friends, see a particular artist, and support a community organization or event, according to the National Endowment of the Arts study done in 2017. (Dwyer, C. et al., 2020) The top reasons we do not attend concerts are, lack of time or interest, it costs too much, and too difficult to get there. (Dwyer, C. et al., 2020) Fortunately, these barriers can be changed. This study will help me with the data to understand why we attend concerts.

What do we do to retain the new audience?

Rebecca Winzenried’s piece “Into Thin Air” suggests that finding ways to remove newcomer barriers can make them regulars of the symphony orchestra. (Winzenried, 2009) Newcomers are more likely not to return; this is called audience churn. (Winzenried, 2009) This churn happens to 90% of all newcomers. (Winzenried, 2009) While efforts to retain audiences yield only a 10% return rate, this task is daunting but important. Retaining is when Community engagement comes in. By deepening bonds with the audience and building a community of music lovers. Once the audience is retained, it is important to get feedback regularly. Also, feedback from those who do
not return will give insight into what the organization can do to improve. In “Classical Music Revamps Its Image to Attract a Younger Audience” by Adam May and Lisa Binns, we learn how to drive a younger audience into music hall seats. May and Binns explore how other orchestras opt to lose their tuxedos and add videos to bring in and keep younger audiences entertained. (May & Binns, 2014) These articles offer ideas to attract and retain new sustainable audiences.

What have other governments done to draw a sustainable audience?

There have been many ways others have tried to grow an audience, from giving a membership yearly patron and first access to tickets to dinner and a show package. The KSO gives buddy tickets to season holders who buy before a particular date. In Manchester, England, the Test Drive the Arts (TDA) program allowed people to explore the arts for free. (Scollen, 2009) The program was popular and brought a 30% increase in audience. (Scollen, 2009) This program was also used by the Australian Council of the Arts (ACA) to find new ways to increase audiences in the arts. The ACA decided that the best way to attract a new audience was called the Talk Theater (TT) program. (Scollen, 2009) The TT program helped rebuild the arts in Australia. The results showed that performance art companies retained 30% of new audiences. (Scollen, 2009) Australia's TT experienced the same from their program, whereas New Zealand did not see any change in attendance. (Scollen, 2009) This study is particularly interesting as it discusses ways to get government involvement to help the arts with audience development and community engagement.

Will community engagement stop the loss of audience?
Many symphony orchestras have tried diverse ways to engage the community through surveys, outreach, and minor attitudinal changes. Community engagement could lead to a sustainable audience. The study about community engagement initiatives by Julia Robertson states that there are internal actions that symphony orchestras can take. There are three ways to find an audience. The first is to become seen and make the Symphony Orchestra an important part of the community by building bonds with the audience. (Robertson, 2008) Bring down barriers by accommodating new audience members with adult education, better time, and day to attend a concert, and adding. Once the KSO knows what barriers there are, it can start elevating them. Secondly, allow more time to mingle and become more theatrical through creative lighting. Symphony Orchestras can do this by introducing short sets and longer intermissions for socializing. (Robertson, 2008) Theatrical lighting can give a dramatic flair to any performance. This is something minuscule but could make all the difference. The third is to add more relevant music for a newer audience. More contemporary mixed with classical music can work. Using these types of mixes, we can educate how the origins of one type of music can form another. The case study by Rong Jiang explains that successful community programs included education projects, family programming, performing in public places, audience choice concerts, and using digital technologies. (Jiang, 2019) The KSO does education, family programming, and digital technology, in which they excel. Performing outside of the concert hall or allowing the audience to choose the music is something the KSO does not do. Robertson and Jiang's studies help with solutions to advance community engagement and draw a new audience.

Methodology

Research Question: How to engage the community through programming and events to accommodate a new sustainable audience for the Kishwaukee Symphony Orchestra?
I used a survey for ages 20-50 to see what the people in DeKalb County want from the KSO. I used Qualtrics to make the survey, and I will be surveying all of DeKalb County and the surrounding areas through Facebook Township groups. This is a qualitative study, and I have used some secondary data from the National Endowment of Arts study on attendees and non-attendees of live music concerts. This study examines the Kishwaukee Symphony Orchestra (KSO), a nonprofit organization. The mission of the KSO is to engage, educate, and enrich the community through music. (kishorchestra.org) The KSO engages the community through music that may not normally be exposed to the symphony through concerts both free and at low cost. KSO educates DeKalb youth through community outreach at Dekalb County schools and at concerts. KSO enriches musicians by offering a place for local professionals, students, and amateur musicians to play. (kishorchestra.org)

Kishwaukee Symphony Orchestra History

The KSO started in 1976. (kishorchestra.org) In the beginning, there were no scheduled practices or set concert seasons. (kishorchestra.org) Now, the organization holds weekly practices and works hard to bring a full six concerts per season. All practices and concerts are held at Northern Illinois University's Music Building, and the Boutell Memorial Concert Hall is also in the Music Building. Special guests and conductors are welcome to play with the KSO. (kishorchestra.org) Since no building houses the KSO, the Ellwood House Grounds houses the office of KSO. This space holds a small office, the KSO's music library, and storage for concert decorations.

The board consists of Ken Olsen President, Bill Cummings Vice President, David Sinason Treasurer, Linc Smelser Music Director, Jerrold Zar Secretary, Toni Krull Budget Director, Kirk Lundbeck Grants Coordinator, Gretchen Moore, Kishwaukee Symphony Associates President,
and Chairpersons Geoffrey Decker, Deb Loitz, Ann Tucker, and Victoria Young.

(kishorchestra.org) The KSO’s Music Director and board work together to establish policies and programs. (kishorchestra.org) This organization has a small staff with only three to five part-time employees. Only a few musicians are offered a stipend to play with the KSO. Otherwise, musicians are on a volunteer basis. Non-musician volunteers give support at concerts.

Initiatives

The KSO is an arts sub-sector nonprofit. There are several efforts that KSO is involved in. They have a free Children's Concert at the Egyptian Theater. The children are bussed to the Egyptian Theater for a concert, which is at the cost of the KSO. This community outreach is to bring music to children that they may not hear otherwise. KSO musicians go to local schools during music and band classes to enrich young musicians from DeKalb County Schools. (kishorchestra.org) They also provide certain instruments to low-income students in DeKalb County. The KSO has the Arthur D. Montzka competition that offers a scholarship to young musicians. They offer stipends for exceptional Northern Illinois University student musicians who play with the KSO. Also, there is a free Halloween concert the weekend just before Halloween. This concert is freely given to get families involved with the KSO. The show is a type of community engagement to draw in a new kind of audience. The free Halloween concerts are well attended. Community engagement builds trust and a sense of belonging, which makes for a deep-rooted audience.

The 2022-2023 season cost the KSO $100,919. (GuideStar.org) The KSO is funded by donors, fundraisers, and an endowment. Last season brought in $116,436 in revenue. (GuideStar.org) The KSO has an endowment that has kept it alive through the pandemic. According to Tamara Farrell, KSO Publicist, and Music Librarian, Giving Tuesday and DCNP's Give DeKalb County
There are two fundraisers of the year. During Giving Tuesday, $5,500 was donated to KSO. Last year, Give DeKalb County brought in $38,000 to the KSO and $4,000 to the endowment fund. (givedekalbcounty.org) Grants are the second largest source of funding for the organization. The Orchestra receives the Farny R. Wurlitzer Grant for $12,500. (dekalbccc.org) This May, the KSO went to the Illinois Arts Council for a speaking engagement at the Egyptian Theater and is looking at grants offered by the Agency. The Illinois Arts Council Agency is a branch of the State of Illinois that gives out grants to individual artists and artistic organizations. (arts.Illinois.gov). This council was doing outreach to several Illinois communities. Ticket sales are another way the KSO funds concerts and incentives. Ticket sales brought in $18,443 in 2022. (GuideStar.org)

Results and Conclusion

This research is aimed to explore how the KSO can build a sustainable audience through community engagement. By doing this survey, the KSO will better understand what Dekalb County residents and others outside DeKalb County want from the KSO. Luckily, the KSO is far from closing, but the audience needs to be built, and new audience members must be retained due to the attendance reduction over the years. The KSO survey attracted 60 responses from all over DeKalb County and six other counties.

Results of Survey

The results show that the community wants from the KSO what it already provides: quality entertainment in concert form. The community widely knows KSO. Word of mouth is the way people hear about the KSO. The KSO has concerts on the weekends in the evenings, which is the preferred day and time. Yet the top barrier was too busy to go to a concert. The survey revealed
that people do go to concerts multiple times yearly. The results show a desire for special theme concerts, and they are not interested in adult education in any form. The median age group among 20–50-year-olds was 24.

The response of yes to have you ever heard of the KSO was 34, and there were 5 nos. So, the message of the KSO is being seen.
This question was only answered if you said yes to the previous question. Understanding the sources of the lines of communication tells others about the KSO. Getting information to friends and family, as well as the KSO staff members and musicians, will help attract a new audience to attend KSO concerts. Where posters and flyers may not be something the KSO should spend resources on.
The last two questions asked about music genres that people listen to. By examining this, the KSO can better understand what music they could inject into programming. Changing programming slightly could interest new audience members to come to concerts and return. Understanding what your audience likes in music helps get them to attend concerts. Also, connecting how classical music relates to popular music will leave an impression on new audience attendees and educate them about classical music. Which eliminates a barrier.
Barriers are what keep people from attending a concert or special event. Being too busy is the top reason for not attending a KSO concert. The other answer was often all three, one person said lack of proper notice of upcoming concerts. The charts that follow would alleviate the lack of time barrier.
This reflects a suitable time and day for people to attend. Weekends are the preferred days to see a concert. The time is still in the evenings, starting at 5-7 pm. The KSO now has concerts at the weekend during the evening.

This section is about normal concerts and the price the audience is willing to pay. This is important because KSO can change its programming to attract new audience members. A special theme
concert with modern music could be a way to attract new attendees. The ticket price for an adult is $18.00. The price is slightly higher than what was indicated as being ideal. Even so, this minor increase should not keep people from going to concerts.

A special event is a term for a fundraising event. The results show that concerts are what people expect. The ticket prices reflect that 13 people would pay $20.00-$29.99 a ticket. Inquiring about
which type of event the new audience will attend helps the KSO understand what the community wants and what they will pay for it.

The top answer to what social media platform do you use most often is Facebook. These results are skewed since the social media used to distribute the survey was Facebook. Instagram and TikTok both had four people preferring them to Facebook. YouTube and Spotify both had one person preferring them to Facebook.
Seeing that one of the barriers that kept people from going to the Symphony was the lack of exposure. Knowing if the KSO should invest time into adult education. The result was an overwhelming no. With 17 people saying none. Eight people said yes to a lecture before the concert which the KSO already does. Ten people said a YouTube series would be something that would interest them. Finally, eight people liked the podcast idea. From these results, the KSO is already engaging the community and expanding adult education with the lecture before the concert.
Understanding where the audience lives is important to focus community engagement efforts.

This data allows the KSO to examine whether it is worth looking outside Dekalb and Sycamore and ways to draw in this audience. In this instance, the data shows that 11 people living outside the Dekalb and Sycamore area completed the survey.

The audience's age is important when one is seeking a sustainable audience. Knowing these results helps with focus community engagement endeavors. These outcomes can allow the KSO to make
minor changes to encourage a sustainable audience to attend concerts. The median age that answered was 24. The KSO is interested in the 20-50 range.

![Chart showing Northern Illinois University student status]

This question measured whether NIU students knew about the KSO. Since the Symphony practices and conducts concerts on NIU’s campus. The KSO can use these results as a campus community engagement. This will allow students to explore the campus and experience music they were not exposed to before. The interesting thing about this question was the ages of the students, and the median age was 37. With only five students who answered, it is hard to know if the KSO is reaching the NIU students. Another study would need to be done to understand the KSO campus engagement.

CONCLUSION

This study aims to understand how to use community engagement to build a sustainable audience. If audience development were a drive, community engagement would be the vehicle. The KSO and other symphonies need to grasp the image of the traditional symphony excluding the newer audience they are trying to attract. There must be a happy medium between the old and
new audience members. This is a tough balance, but able to be done. This survey is a start but more needs to be done to understand if my theory is correct.

Theoretical Implications

The theoretical implementations of my study are for the theory and research of nonprofits in the arts and humanities sectors. My approach to this topic was to explain the connection between community engagement and audience development. Firstly, community engagement is necessary to understand the community’s wants, measured through a survey. By understanding those wants, the KSO can measure the effects on the audience. Secondly, audience development is just a way to build a new audience. Without engaging the community, the KSO would not know what to focus on. The survey suggested expanding our social media beyond DeKalb Sycamore city limits. The KSO needed to invite people from all parts of DeKalb County. It may have been a small amount that answered there is interest. Also, County, Rock, and Pop are the top genres and must be incorporated into the KSO concerts. If the KSO can draw lines to help new audience members understand how their favorite music is connected to the master composers.

Practical Implications

I suggest that community engagement and audience development go hand in hand. The first step is community engagement. By doing this survey, the KSO can start with minor changes. Changes such as including a socialization time for the audience. This is a community-building opportunity. Dramatic lighting in the lobby and during the concert. Give the audience an experience they will remember. This shows that the KSO listens to the wants of the community. This gives validation to the community and builds trust. It will also take the KSO out and be seen by the community. The KSO will also need to make an attitudinal change. The new audience
does want something other than the traditional symphony. That symphony makes them feel uncomfortable and excluded. My theory is that once trust and visibility are established, the audience will build. This should stop the audience churn as well.

Limitations

I used Facebook town groups to get my data. The results may be a bit skewed, knowing what social media is preferred since I used Facebook groups. The sample size was small, with only 60 respondents. After cleaning up the data, I was left with 45 respondents. If I could get the county to put out the survey, more people would have replied to the survey. With the county’s endorsement, the survey would have given some validity. I had a man tell me that he would not do the survey because he does not trust links.

Future Directions

Implementing the suggestion from the survey would be the first step. These minor changes would be beneficial to show that the KSO is listening to the community. Next, the KSO must engage with the community outside the DeKalb and Sycamore area. Finally, the KSO will follow up by comparing audience members from a few years ago to now. This will measure whether these changes are working. Again, the KSO is in decent shape so far. The community overall likes what the KSO produces. The audience development stage has already been engaged with sending out the survey. The KSO must complete this step by meeting the needs found in the results of the survey. Community engagement needs to build bonds that keep them coming back.
The KSO has a core group already that shows up without fail. If we can form this with a sustainable audience, the KSO can go on for years to come.

References


