

Small Arts Centers, Big Hearts

In these challenging times, what makes some arts center thrive while others wither and die? Why is the art center a hub of activity and a local gathering place in one town while in another community, no one knows it's there and all it gathers is dust? This roundtable discussion will review the success of one small arts center, what they're doing that could be adapted by other centers, and what challenges they are facing for the future.

About us

The Jasper Arts Center (JAC) is located in the rural town of Jasper, Indiana, (population 14,000). It is unique in that it is a department of the City of Jasper, the only city-owned Arts Department in the state and one of the few in the country. JAC was originally conceived and built by a group of local business leaders in 1975 and then donated to the city. It was designed to be one of the largest public meeting spaces in the city and to promote cultural attractions which the business leaders thought to use as a recruiting tool for skilled employees. The organization still acts in this capacity today. The City of Jasper has twice been awarded the Governor's Art Award in honor of its continued support of the arts.

This is a multi-discipline arts center with a 675 seat auditorium, a gallery, a dance studio, meeting rooms and an off-site satellite arts space for arts workshops. JAC hosts the following programs in a given year. The annual budget is less than \$600,000. It has a staff of three full-time and nine part-time employees.

- Performing arts – 3 series per year
 - Performer series – main stage, 5 performances.
 - Backstage series – guests sit on the stage with the artist, 4 performances.
 - Family fun series – designed for families with children 3 performances.
- Visual Arts
 - 12 gallery exhibits per year – local, regional, national.
 - 36-50 workshops per year – fall, winter, summer, plus one-day events.
 - Art lectures.
 - Films.
- Educational programming
 - In partnership with the local schools, every child in the Jasper school system receives at least 2 artistic experiences per year.
 - Kennedy Center Partner (this is a big deal for such a small arts center).
- Chalk Walk Arts festival – spring family-oriented arts festival, approximately 3,500 in attendance.
- Hosts 3 resident organizations
 - Dubois County Art Guild (43rd year).
 - Dance Central – dance classes for all ages.
 - Actors Community Theatre – local theatrical productions, 2-3 per year.
- Rentals
 - Facility rentals of all types including hosting a governor's debate, 40-60 / year.

Recommendations (What works for us)

We're always changing but after 35 years, we have found some procedures or ideas which work for us. Many of these suggestions could be used by other arts presenters.

- Use good business practices. This sounds like common sense but one of the most over-heard remarks is, "Why don't the arts operate like a business?" Just good office practices - filing, follow-up, handling money - should be standard.
- Pay attention to your budget. (You *do* have a budget, don't you?) Ours is updated every month and we NEVER go over budget. In fact, we often turn money back in at the end of the year. A balanced budget represents good fiscal responsibility to your board, community leaders, and donors.
- Promote, promote, promote. You can't have too much marketing. If people don't know who you are, where you are, and what you do, why would they come to see you? These are some of the marketing tools that we use.
 - Paid - newspapers, radio, TV, billboards, posters, flyers, web site, season guides, newsletters, sports cards, bookmarks, banners, building sign and display sign.
 - Unpaid - blog, Facebook, media releases about everything we do (85 sources), alerting the media to photo ops, writing op ed articles, radio and TV interviews, guest speaker at every service group or club in the area at least once a year, free ticket giveaways, contests, drawings, utility bill stuffers
- Go where the people are. If people won't come to your arts center, then take the arts to them. Some events we have hosted off-site have been free workshops at schools or nursing homes, paint-ins at our Riverwalk or downtown, annual artist studio sale at the train depot, setting up a table at school and job fairs. Our annual Chalk Walk is held every spring on the downtown square which is blocked off. This has become a highly anticipated family event.
- Build partnerships - other people can be your biggest supporters and promoters. Some of our partnerships are with:
 - Schools - local, regional, college or university, pre-schools.
 - Local government (and regional and state) - invite your congressman or representative to your events.
 - Community organizations - Rotary, Kiwanis, Optimists, sororities, clubs - and remember to support them to with a ticket donation.
 - Local businesses - the arts are cool and people want to be associated with them.
 - Nursing homes.
 - Local media - how good a schmoozer are you? Now's the time to shine. Build relationships.
 - Churches - often look for group community projects. We had our new landscaping done by a local church. It's surprising what 25 people can get done in less than three hours. And they brought their own shovels and rakes, too!
 - Hispanic outreach organizations.
 - All of these are great places to recruit volunteers, too!

- Give back to your community. What can *you* do for *them*?
 - We offer three tiers of rental rates – arts, non-profit, and commercial
 - We always donate tickets for fund raisers and raffles (they don't cost us anything and can raise money for a supportive organization).
- Know who your target audience is. Do a demographic chart of which age groups are participating in which events. This will let you know where you have holes or where you need to concentrate your efforts. (see attached)
- Get your community involved
 - Volunteers – can be your Ambassadors for the Arts.
 - Community exhibits or performances.
 - Free workshops.
- Be willing to change and try new ideas to inspire and excite. Some new ideas we've tried are:
 - Art lectures
 - Brown Bag with the Arts
 - Art films
 - Family Fun Series
- Have a Strategic Plan and review it often. This is your roadmap.

Challenges

Arts presenters of every size face challenges in this difficult climate. Being able to adapt to change is critical not only for survival but to thrive. If we are bored with our programs, our audiences will be, too. Some of the issues we face are:

- Dealing with change – It's important to keep up with (or ahead of the curve) change and current trends. Surf the web, read the trade magazines, exchange ideas with other presenters. And be *willing* to change!
- Older demographics – How do we bring in new audiences and new performances without alienating our current audience?
- How do we get the word out to people who don't read the local newspaper or who don't listen to local radio or TV?
- How do we deal with the economic challenges of today's market?
- How do we compete with an ever-increasing array of offerings – Internet, satellite TV and radio, high quality CDs, ease of travel to other locals?
- Be willing to cull the deadwood. Cut what isn't working anymore. Just because we've always done it this way doesn't mean we must keep doing it this way.

Resources

The number of books, magazines, and web resources are almost infinite but these are a few of my favorites.

Words that Sell, Richard Bayan. Need some help to put zing into your ad copy or grant report? This resource is loaded with words to build excitement and bring in customers and donations.

Arts, Entertainment and Tourism, Howard Hughes. Arts and tourism work very closely. This is a great book for stating your case about bringing dollars into your community.

Theatre Management, David M. Conte, Stephen Langley. This is a *very* comprehensive book on theatre and performing arts management.

The 22 Immutable Laws of Marketing, Al Ries and Jack Trout. If you don't know much about marketing, this book provides the basics in layman's terms.

Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach, Beverly Serrell. Bringing more meaning to labels and encourage audience participation.

The Participatory Museum, Nina Simon. This book has many ideas for getting visitors involved.

Museum Branding: How to Create and Maintain Image, Loyalty and Support, Margot A. Wallace (my personal favorite book on branding).

Presenting Performances: A Basic Handbook for the Twenty-first Century, Thomas Wolf. This is a good book for the arts presenter newbie. It discusses the basics in language anyone can understand.