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Pursuing the Culturally Specific Donor

Michael L. Radice

Not-for-profit performing arts organizations, with increasing voracity, have been pursuing a culturally specific approach to programming with the hopes that it will increase audience size and diversity as well as financial support. For example, the Joe Papp Public Theatre in New York City produced *Bring in ãda Noise, Bring in ãda Funk*, which moved to Broadway some time ago and continues on an open run. The Wings Theatre Company has moved to producing as many as four plays on its stage in any given week, presenting works in their gay, children's, fringe, and mainstage series'. Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts' summer outdoor series will be producing a concert featuring the drummer Soh Deiko in August 1998. Despite all these good faith efforts, the question remains as to whether the conventional wisdom of presenting culturally specific concerts, to tap the vein of "inclusive fitness,"(1) has worked to attract the elusive subcultures not just into the seats, but into the organization's individual donor bases.

To determine the payoff in terms of donor base diversification, this author interviewed the Development Directors or General Managers of 14 Metropolitan Area New York City performing arts organizations, and one regional arts council, to determine if their programming efforts had increased the subculture diversity of their individual donor bases, and to assess their methods for developing subculture donors into pattern givers. Included in the sample were established institutions such as Carnegie Hall and the Henry Street Settlement arts center, as well as upstarts such as the Howard County Arts Council. Culturally specific performing arts organizations were also included, such as the Stonewall Chorale and Ballet Hispanico, to insure a source of information on how specific subcultures were pursued by their members. To guarantee the reputations of these institutions, this author agreed to dissociate organizational names with specific results, given that some of the findings may be viewed by some as uncomplimentary. A complete list of institutions is attached.

The sample included the following types of performing arts organizations: six theatre, three dance, three music, and three multiple category. There were: two international organizations, defined as having their headquarters in New York City yet doing international tours and receiving donor support from outside North America; two national organizations, defined by their North American touring schedules and donor support; nine regional organizations, defined as those producing locally but, factoring out tourists, drawing their audiences from the metropolitan area; and two whose missions were to present performances for their immediate residential communities. All fifteen provided culturally specific programming (2) for at least one subculture, even if it self-restricted to the one defined in the mission statement: For example, a Polish theatre company focusing on the work of its parent country playwrights.

All of those interviewed expressed an interest in diversifying their individual donor bases. Interviewees posited a philosophy that a diverse donor base was insurance for long-term financial health. This observation can be paraphrased and summarized as follows: "If my donor backgrounds reflect the cultural mosaic of New York, I know that I have the potential to tap them to expand the support of their communities even further." However, none of the organizations kept statistics of donor subculture identification beyond the unreliable zip codes, so none had a system in place to engage or support a web. Several other reasons for desiring donor subculture diversification were also mentioned. For example: ten expressed a wish for their donor bases to reflect the community mosaic; seven referred to increased competition for the dollar; and five reported the need to comply with diversification requests made by private foundations and government supporters.

Of those expressing a wish for their donor bases to reflect the community mosaic, six had multicultural programming as a goal in their mission statements, and four had missions focusing on a single subculture. In terms of geographical communities served: five were regional, three served their neighborhood communities, one was national, and one was international. All of the regional organizations with multicultural programming in their mission statements were represented in this group. This was no surprise because competition for audience members and donors would be the greatest for these organizations, given that their swaths take in all of the metropolitan area subcultures. Despite the fact that two national and international organizations expressed a desire for diversity in their donor bases, they joined the other two in the sample by expressing the hardship of developing subculture donor bases on the road. They commented that it was difficult to establish the needed sense of connection between the donor and the group while on tour: a prerequisite for most subculture donations. This was where the local community organizations had an advantage. They reported being neighborhood driven, thus enabling them to more readily tap what has long been considered the best sources of individual donor commitment: familiarity and relatedness. (3) A sense of comfort was expressed by the community organization administrators in terms of their audiences and donors reflecting their communities by default.

The literature provides support for the reality of the fear expressed by these organizations for the ever-increasing competition. Giving USA's 1991 and 1995 annual reports (4) indicated a 17% increase in the number of tax exempt charitable organizations during this period. There was a 4% increase between 1994 and 1995 alone. The subcultures have also added to the competition by developing and creating additional performing arts organizations which reflect their cultural tastes. For example, the Upper Manhattan Arts Community earlier this year began an effort to establish a new Harlem performing arts center. The plans also include: rebuilding the Harlem Cultural Council, the only arts council of color with a line item in the NYC budget; creating a new expansion arts program; and publishing, documenting, and computerizing thousands of manuscripts (e.g., plays of Black playwrights). (5) The Chinese Cultural Center and Taipei Art Gallery recently opened at 159 Lexington Ave. in Midtown. (6) Also, some of the established community performing arts centers have become more assertive at pursuing subculture audiences. For example, the Lehman Center for the Performing Arts, in the Bronx, recently changed its focus to reflect the neighborhood mix, targeting individuals with extremely limited funds and special needs, and also began collaborations with the Caribbean Cultural Center and Hostos Community College. (7) The Jamaica Center for the Performing & Visual Arts, in Queens, did the same thing in 1994. (8) So, the fear of increased competition for the donor dollar appears warranted.

The concern expressed in terms of being able to comply with the community diversity conditions set by foundations and government agencies likewise has a foundation in fact. (9) Over the last several years, dollars awarded by private foundations have come with increasing numbers of conditions. Some of those conditions have included audience and/or programming diversification; the purpose being to encourage participation in the performing arts by underserved populations. For example, the Lila Wallace Reader's Digest Fund has established funding priorities which provide monies specifically for programming and audience diversification. (10) The grants range in value from the low five to the high six figures, and some awards can be spread over a period of years. Similar expectations exist for government funders, such as the New York State Council on the Arts (NYSCA). NYSCA, not unlike the Lila Wallace Reader's Digest Fund, has a special funding program earmarking grants to organizations who serve underserved populations, known as the State and Local Partnership Program. (11)

Despite the reported fears of income losses, and all the expressed desires to diversify donor bases as a means of expanding financial support, only two of the organizations had strategized and/or implemented plans to attract and develop subculture donors: and both had limited their efforts to the single, specific, subculture mentioned in each their mission statements. None of the organizations had a plan to draw a donor base from the metropolitan area's rich cultural mosaic. All of them asserted the assumption that

providing "quality" culturally specific programming was sufficient to convert these individuals from audience members to donors. However, an emerging body of literature disputes this conjecture.

For example, gay men and lesbians, women (regardless of affectional orientation), and Blacks, all evidence unique patterns of charitable decision making. In a study by Salais and Fischer, (12) it was determined that urban gay and lesbian adults were found to score significantly higher on an empathy assessment than heteroaffectionals, positing support for their higher likeliness of volunteering their time and money to charitable organizations than heteroaffectionals. AIDS issues may attract their attention more than others. Dickey (13) reported on a survey of urban gay, lesbian, biaffectional, and transgendered charitable donors. The results indicated that when AIDS organizations were factored out, these groups gave equally to gay and non-gay causes, signaling the subculture's response to AIDS as a source of concern, attention, and focus in terms of charitable giving.

Newman (14) found gender differences in philanthropic decision-making. In an interview of 182 alumni of a private school in the Midwest, it was determined that women were: much more likely than men to base a donation decision on whether there is an organizational crisis; more willing to give if an organization had a single purpose; wanted more time to be educated about the group's purpose; and required a stronger personal connection to the organization.

A survey of Black charitable behavior conducted by the Joint Center of Political Studies, as reported in Giving USA, (15) found that in 1985, Blacks gave 3/4's of their income to churches and other religious organizations, compared to the overall church contribution percentage of 43.61%. Carson, in his essay on the evolution of Black philanthropy, (16) commented that a review of the history of Black Americans indicated that the Black church has long provided for many of the spiritual, social, and economic needs of the Black community. Therefore, it is not unreasonable to assume that in many cases the church has continued to serve as a conduit for channeling charitable donations received from members of the congregation to other organizations. Carson further reported that Black charitable organizations traditionally have been informal groups that operated in relatively small communities, where there was a high probability for the donor and recipient to know each other either directly or indirectly.

These aspects of Black philanthropy were successfully exploited by one regional organization included in this study. To attract Black audience members and individual donors, the organization set up a series of short performances in an intimate Harlem studio space, and followed each with a cake and coffee reception modeled after those found in local Black churches. Marketing for the performances likewise focused on the churches through the posting of performance flyers on church bulletin boards. All of the performances were sold-out, and a stream of \$25 donations were made at the receptions. Recognizing the need to maintain personal contact, the development staff followed up with regular newsletters and requests for additional small donations. The result was a quadrupling of many of the \$25 gifts within the first year.

All but two of the organizations in this study wished they could devote this kind of attention to the development of individual subculture donors, lamenting that they lacked the resources. Several annexed that it was quicker to pick up the phone and get a \$10,000 donation from a foundation, or to squeeze a Board member into putting peer pressure on his or her friends to hand over a few thousand. This author doesn't question the need or expeditiousness of these methods of cash generation. However, with the increasing squeeze of corporate, foundation, and government dollars, coupled with the need and responsibility for the organization to reflect its community at all levels, subculture audience members emerge as an untapped source for diversifying the organization's financial support base. Individual pattern donors are the best prospects for new gifts, larger gifts, and estate gifts, (17) and they won't begin giving until they are asked in a way in which they can relate. In the ever-diversifying urban mosaic, subculture audience members have the potential to fill the seats, provide a large portion of the

funds, and facilitate community support. Consequently, their value to the organization can no longer be overlooked.

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Notes

(1) Identifies those who are prone to help you as a function of the connection and familiarity with you. Burnstein, Eugene, Christian Candall and Shinobu Kitayama. "Some Neo-Darwinian Decision Rules for Altruism: Weighing Cues for Inclusive Fitness as a Function of the Biological Importance of the Decision." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 67.5 (1994) 773-789.

(2) Culturally specific programming is defined as presenting a performance created by a recognized individual of a specific subculture, or providing programming which has an identifiable subculture theme.

(3) Aune, R. Kelly. "A Relational Obligations Approach to the Foot-in-the-Mouth Effect." *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 24.6 (1994) 546-556;

Burnstein, Eugene, Christian Candall and Shinobu Kitayama. "Some Neo-Darwinian Decision Rules for Altruism: Weighing Cues for Inclusive Fitness as a Function of the Biological Importance of the Decision." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 67.5 (1994) 773-789; Mandeleker, Jeannie.

"Charity Begins at Home." *Financial World* 162.13 (1993) 70; Newman, Raquel.

"Know Your Donor: Gender Differences in Giving." *Fund Raising Management* 27.5 (1996) 31; and Ostrower, Francie. *Why the Wealthy Give: The Culture of Elite Philanthropy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1995. 55.

(4) Giving USA. n.p.: AAFRC Trust for Philanthropy, 1996. 1995. 1991.

(5) Armbrust, Roger. "Harlem Arts Groups Expanding Mission." *Back Stage* 14 Apr. (1998): 6.

(6) Chang, Wen-Yu. Personal interview. 8 Aug. 1997.

(7) Lehman Center for the Performing Arts. Final Report. 1997.

(8) Jamaica Center for the Performing & Visual Arts. Long Range Plan: FY 1994-1998. Jamaica, NY: Jamaica Center for the Performing & Visual Arts, 1994.

(9) Flanagan, James. "Feeling the Pinch. Cultural Institutions Are Reeling from a Fall in Corporate Philanthropy." *The Los Angeles Times* 15 Mar. (1995):

Business; Part-D, Financial Desk; and Grimes, William. "Tough Line on Grants for Arts: Shape Up." *The New York Times* 5 Aug. (1996): C15+.

- (10) Lila Wallace Reader's Digest Fund. Online. Lilawallace.org/overview/index.htm. 27 Apr. 1998.
- (11) New York State Council on the Arts. Online. Artswire.org/~nysca/index.html. 27 Apr. 1998.
- (12) Salais, Debra and Robert B. Fischer. "Sexual Preference and Altruism." *Journal of Homosexuality* 28.1/2 (1995) 185-196.
- (13) Dickey, Marilyn. "New Survey Details Giving Patterns of Homosexuals." *The Chronicle of Philanthropy*. 26 Mar. (1998): 24.
- (14) Newman, "Know Your" 31.
- (15) Giving, 1988.
- (16) Carson, Emmett D. "The Evolution of Black Philanthropy: Patterns of Giving and Voluntarism." *Philanthropic Giving: Studies in Varieties and Goals*. Ed. Richard Magat. New York: Oxford UP, 1989. 92+
- (17) Greenfield, J. M. *Fund-Raising: Evaluating and Managing the Fund Development Process*. John New York: Wiley & Sons, 1991. 9.



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