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## Festivals and Institutional Brand Building: A Learning Opportunity for All Arts & Cultural Organizations

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When the European Festivals Research Project announced a call for papers to be presented at an April 2010 workshop in Poland, they sought to “focus on festivals that address complex intellectual topics and large social issues, combining debates, lectures and workshops with performances, concerts, film projects, exhibitions and installations. Festivals are perhaps uniquely able to provide focus to areas of free thought (Stavanger), science (Genoa), philosophy (Modena), economy (Trento), food (Bologna), creativity (Florence), politics (Edinburgh), spirituality (Torino), and journalism (Perugia). Several festivals address climate change, feminism (City of Women in Ljubljana), globalization, migration and urban interculturality (Jewish festival in Budapest and the Festival of Four Cultures in Lodz). The workshop was part of a larger programme entitled: *Celebrating Europe: How International Festivals Strengthen Civil Society*, and included round table discussions on the social and cultural capital of cities and their festivals’ contribution to urban development strategies.” (<http://www.efa-aef.eu/>)

When you search the word “festival” on Google, however, approximately 265 million results appear, so the task of even defining “festival” can be daunting. Festivals vary in size and scope, celebrating everything from the music of Josquin to bluegrass, bourbon to pumpkins, and alligators to woolly worms. While the focus, size, and location of festivals varies greatly, their intended impacts all share one common element – a celebration of community. In this edition of *Arts Insights*, we will narrow our focus to the challenges and opportunities that are common to performing arts festivals and explore how the strategies of successful festivals can be applied year-round to all arts and cultural organizations.

### **Embrace Your Stakeholders**

Festivals can be a time of excitement, informality, Herculean efforts, high productivity, community engagement, volunteer interaction, increased participation and brand building. A multitude of stakeholders are involved in making any performing arts festival a reality, including Board, staff, donors, audiences, and particularly artists. For those organizations that offer a performance season in addition to their (typically summer) festival, they often notice that a different “energy” exists during the festival. People become connected to the organization in deeper ways, acting as vocal ambassadors and loyal patrons, many even planning their annual vacations around the festival while recruiting friends and family to join them for the experience. In many places, performing arts festivals are a growth industry while other areas of the arts and culture sector are cutting back, attracting smaller audiences, and facing reduced budgets. With this in mind, what core lessons can performing arts festivals teach the arts and culture sector as a whole?

Most festivals cannot be produced in the same way that a “traditional season” is planned. They need large numbers of volunteers in key roles, a higher number of in-kind donations, and the ability to sustain a high level of energy during the concentrated period of the festival. Festivals do a great job of asking for help. In general individuals *want* to help, to have a role, to be needed, to contribute, to be valued and acknowledged, it’s a perfect match for community engagement!

## **Market and Message Your Organization's Uniqueness**

How is your organization minimizing competition and maximizing opportunities? Now more than ever, competition for ticket revenue and contributions is high. To survive and thrive, organizations must go beyond selling the event, and look for ways to clearly convey the unique and positive impact they have upon their community.

Successful festivals do a great job of communicating their uniqueness. Many festivals strategically (or intuitively) create a sense of destination – celebrating and marketing the location or region of the festival to convey a sense of the total experience the festival will offer, creating a sense of anticipation, as well as concrete expectations, in their target audiences. Think of the festivals in Aspen, Santa Fe, La Jolla, Spoleto, Salzburg, and other “destinations.” In the performing arts, those names now conjure up images that let you imagine yourself actually being there. Candid pictures of engaged audience members, information on local attractions, and details on destination amenities packages are all prominently featured in the promotional materials of these organizations.

For *all* arts & culture organizations each performance, event, venue, or even a board meeting has its own unique “vibe” – intentional or not, tangible or intangible, subjective or objective. If that “experience” can be described and celebrated along with other vital information such as the core mission, artistic programming, and the relationship between artists and audience members, a clear and convincing picture of *why* and *how* your organization is unique and worthy of participation and support will be conveyed.

## **Create an Effective, Dedicated and Loyal Team of Ambassadors**

During festivals, there is often a sense of increased staff and volunteer productivity, enthusiasm, and camaraderie, especially in the weeks leading up to and during the events. Alternatively, burn-out and turnover can be a real threat immediately following (or even during) a festival. Artists themselves can be drawn to a particular festival by things other than money, such as the opportunity to work with colleagues or repertoire that they couldn't otherwise, to mentor others, or to enjoy a family-friendly opportunity to balance artistic duties with social time in a vacation setting.

Patrons may feel an increased sense of being a part of an organization as the daily performances, receptions, behind-the-scenes opportunities and informal interaction with the artists often create a sense of family and community. Board members and donors may become more generous with their time and resources as the events of a festival unfold, as they engage in a visibly active hands-on role. Successful festivals tend to find ways to create, celebrate, and market a sense of belonging to their diverse groups of stakeholders, which in turn reinforces stakeholder participation and draws others to become part of the family.

Like the dynamics that exist at a festival, it is important for all organizations to have and to be able to articulate a clear purpose, an understanding of all the factors that make them unique, and a compelling argument for *why* they matter to the community; thus building a group of people that passionately believe in the value of your organization. Think about your organization's successes with individual donors over the years. What were the compelling reasons for each of your donors to give? Think about the times your professional staff worked long, hard hours in order to help advance the organization. What were the internal and external factors that motivated them? Think about the times your volunteers were engaged, enthusiastic, and effective. What were the factors that motivated them? Identify the things that influence the hearts and minds (and wallets) of your stakeholders and find ways to communicate them throughout the year. When you understand your organization's purpose, what motivates its people, and how it is valued by your stakeholders, you will be able to create compelling messages that resonate with your mission, celebrate your successes, and leverage the values of the individuals you seek to serve.

### **Build Year-Round Relationships and Presence**

Producing an annual festival is not simply about the moment in time that the event occurs. Seasonal festival organizers must find ways to keep themselves in the minds of audiences, donors and community partners year-round. Often, they must communicate effectively with artistic personnel and support staff who don't permanently reside in the community. Most festivals have learned ways to get the attention of seasonal residents through social and community networking (such as bring-a-friend campaigns, outreach to home-owners associations, contact with realtors, etc.). Many offer non-resident attendees creative ways to be involved (as board members, volunteers, and hosts of off-site activities in their hometowns). Of course, all of these efforts require an accurate and efficient patron database. Each of these tools is extremely important to maintain ongoing communication with stakeholders during the "off" season. Many festivals must also overcome the distraction and competition that a beautiful destination provides by creating compelling messages that entice people to attend and be a part of a unique artistic and social experience.

Because of the level of anticipation often associated with an annual event - and the sheer volume of details that would be cost-prohibitive to be handled by professional staff alone - festival organizations tend to communicate with stakeholders more regularly than simply during periodic fundraising or ticket sale campaigns. Updates on the exciting plans underway for the next festival are often communicated through newsletters. Winter season performances are scheduled for both new and existing audiences as an opportunity to stay connected while providing earned and contributed income. Volunteer committees begin meeting early in the process and in-kind donation partners are cultivated, secured and often brought on-site to see the direct impact of their help. As with any cultural organization, it is crucial that conversations with individual donors keep people feeling connected and that a sense of the organization's uniqueness is integrated into all communications and social events. More than just communicating "Buy Your Ticket Today", festivals often share more details about the behind-the-scenes process, providing information on everything from artistic vision to logistical details and, specifically, what it will take to achieve success and where the community's help and participation is needed.

### **Create Tangible Results**

In today's economy, and with today's board leadership and donors, it becomes increasingly important to use resources wisely, invest in areas that bring tangible results, and substantiate decisions with objective data and information. Although experience and intuition serve organizations well, if used alone they can be responsible for preventing an organization from realizing its full potential to grow. When organizations engage in public dialog about how and why they are important, the result is institutional brands, promotional materials, and programs that truly resonate with stakeholders. Ultimately, this will create ongoing momentum, helping to increase contributed income, and focusing energy and resources on areas that deliver tangible results and greater impact to the community.

### **Conclusion**

As arts and cultural organizations plan, execute and, most importantly, serve their communities, there are opportunities to look at the special energy and enthusiasm that exist around festivals and their long-term impacts. When your orchestra, opera company, theater, dance company, or any type of cultural entity understands the key elements of its success, it can then capture its brand in order to inform year-round activities. A festival is never "business as usual." As a result, festivals challenge those involved to embrace new problem-solving techniques, be in-the-moment, and ask for help and involvement from others. In turn, these opportunities provide some of the most intimate and effective ways for organizations to connect with audiences, staff, volunteers and artistic personnel. Let's bring "The Festival" atmosphere - a celebration of community - into "The Season"!

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