AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES FOR NEW WORLD PERFORMANCE
LABORATORY: A PROPOSAL

A Thesis
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Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to explore audience engagement efforts by local arts organizations, Neos Dance Theatre and Summit Choral Society, to determine the most impactful strategies for building and sustaining audiences for New World Performance Laboratory. This thesis also discusses the definition of development and engagement strategies in the 21st century, relationship between arts and community, and motivations and barriers related to arts attendance in order to obtain a broader knowledge of audience engagement. The strategies learned from local arts organizations may inspire other arts organizations to develop more creative strategies and to enrich the arts in the Akron community.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Since 2000, Akron is facing a population problem. “Population growth among young professionals ages 25 to 34 was stagnant in our city from 2000 to 2013” (Kyle Kutuchief, “New Report Offers Inspiration on Reversing Flat Growth in Akron, Ohio”). Meanwhile, the percentage of the aging population is increasing: the number of people aged 60 and older will exceed the number of people aged under 18 by 2020. This situation has consequences in other areas such as elderly care facilities, loss of income taxes, and inevitably, economic decline (Akron Community Foundation 12). Ellen Rosewall states in her book Arts Management: Uniting Arts and Audiences in the 21st Century that arts and culture organizations have been a tool for communities to overcome local issues by connecting people together and creating community pride and identity (Rosewall 246-247).

Imagine what it would be like to have theatre that could inspire change in the community. New World Performance Laboratory (NWPL) has been sowing seeds of change in Akron for 24 years. NWPL does not have spectacular sets for their performances or famous actors that easily attract audiences. Nonetheless, NWPL’s productions inspire audiences to think about their community, not just themselves. After seeing NWPL’s productions, one thinks about their position in the community and what
action one could possibly do for Akron. Charles Wuorinen, an American composer and Pulitzer Prize winner, explains the difference between entertainment and the arts: the public receives entertainment without effort, but the arts require some work. The compensation for that work is that the public will get more than it had before (qtd. in Bernstein, “Arts Marketing Insights” 13). NWPL’s contributions to the Akron community fit well in this description.

Robert McNutley states in the book, Cities and the Arts, that government used to be primarily responsible for public services. However, leadership roles and positions are changing from government only to community collaboration. Case studies in the past also show that “many of the problems we face can only be solved through interdependent civic partnerships.” (Kemp 240).

Major foundations, including the Knight Foundation, are working to guide people in the community from different levels and backgrounds to move forward together as a whole community. The arts are a powerful tool in this effort. The Knight Foundation’s support in Akron is reflected in the Knight Arts Challenge (Knight Foundation, “Akron”). Alberto Ibargüen, president of the Knight Foundation, stated after the first Knight Arts Challenge-Akron announcement, “Art can help define and lift the soul, helping to create a sense of place and binding us to each other and to our community…” (Knight Foundation, “27 Akron Arts Projects win $1 Million in Knights Arts Challenge Akron”).

NWPL’s work directly addresses the population problem in Akron. “Communities need artists/artistic organizations who are not afraid to check the pulse of the current culture climate…” (Jozsa, “Reviews”). The company’s two artistic directors are theatre
savvy; and the skill, experience, and richly varied background of company members form a good basis for creating valuable work. Their experiences and networks from several years working in theatre in various places (the U.S., Colombia, and Europe) also strengthen the quality of the works. The quality and ability of the company are the reasons why NWPL has been selected for this case study.

Statement of Problem

Theatre needs to balance quality artistic work with good administrative work to maximize its effectiveness. Rosewall explains that audience development is important for arts organizations because recently the size of the arts audience remains stable, but the arts industry serving those limited audiences is continuously increasing. Consequently, it may be more impactful for an arts organization to concern developing audiences in order to increase attendance in the arts as a whole, which also gives everyone in the arts community the opportunity to sustain successful business operations (Rosewall 199).

NWPL has been operating for 24 years, since 1992, with a core audience of around 300. The board members of the Center for Applied Theatre and Active Culture (CATAC), the administrative umbrella for NWPL, agree that the audiences are the same people for many productions. NWPL’s product is not considered mainstream. They are more educational than pure entertainment, which might be a reason why the number of attendees is very limited and grows slowly. If NWPL continues to have the same audience without gaining new attendees, the audience will decrease over time.
Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to explore audience engagement efforts by other local arts organizations to determine the most impactful strategies for building and sustaining audiences for NWPL. The strategies analyzed from the interviews of two other local arts organizations will be adapted for NWPL according to its nature and resources. The strategies learned from these local arts organizations may inspire other arts organizations in Akron to develop more creative strategies and make the arts accessible for a broader audience.

Research Questions

The research questions reflect the author’s personal interest in audience engagement and audience behavior. The questions were asked in order to find current engagement strategies being used by arts organizations and effective strategies for a specific theatre company. These questions are followed by a literature review, which discusses audience development and engagement, community engagement strategies in the 21st century, relationship between the arts and the city, and audience motivations and barriers. The research questions guiding this study and the exploration of the most impactful strategies for building and sustaining NWPL’s audience include:

1. Which audience engagement strategies for local arts organizations are most effective?
   a. How do these strategies inform audience engagement strategies for NWPL?
2. How can existing case studies inform audience engagement strategies for NWPL?

Methods

In order to help NWPL increase the number of attendees, other performing arts organizations were studied to learn how they implement audience engagement strategies. Interviews were conducted with the artistic director and executive director from the two organizations. A survey collected NWPL audience data in order to indicate motivations and barriers for attending and to develop effective strategies for NWPL. Existing studies in the field are also included to support and validate the proposal.

The overview of each chapter explains the process of the study. In the following chapters discuss the meaning of audience development, audience engagement, and community engagement in order to identify the level of activities that arts organizations have been using with the audiences. This study also looks at the importance of the arts as they affect and revitalize cities, as shown in many case studies, and discusses motivations and barriers that affect arts attendance. Chapter III presents the history and backgrounds of the three organizations, showing their identities and differences in programs they provide to Akron community. Chapter IV concludes with interviews with the executive directors and artistic director of the three arts organizations: James Slowiak, co-artistic director of NWPL, Robert Wesner, artistic director of Neos Dance Theatre, and Karen Prasser, executive director of Summit Choral Society. Chapter V analyzes NWPL resources and audience data, compares the NEA audience research to NWPL’s audiences to find a guideline to increase attendance, and proposes audience engagement strategies
for NWPL. The final chapter discusses limitations of this study, research questions, and suggestions for further research.
CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Definition of Development and Engagement Strategies in the 21st Century

Definition

Before commencing any strategies, an arts organization should understand levels of engagement. This understanding will guide the organization to the right strategies for expected results. Grasping development and engagement definitions will inform NWPL of different ways and levels of engaging its audiences. The company can then choose to implement the available options most beneficial and most suitable for the company’s resources and abilities.

Audience development is defined in the Service Industries Journal as “…a pro-active process of cultivation and growth of long-term relationships through engaging, educating, and motivating diverse communities to participate in a creative and entertaining experience” (qtd. in Tajtáková and Arias-Aranda 179). Audience development increases attendance in current audiences, the number of new audiences, and diversity among audiences.

Rosewall defines audience development as the same as marketing activity. But is it as simple as getting the word out? In order to grow its audience, an arts organization has to target and cultivate new audiences and maintain loyalty among its current audience
According to Doug Borwick, audience development is marketing activity for which results might be expected immediately in increasing sales and donations, but it does not necessarily involve a relationship between an arts organization and its audience (Borwick, “Engagement Vocabulary”). The definition of audience development differs slightly according to each expert’s perspective.

One example of audience development activity is giving a discount for a ticket at Summit Choral Society. The company’s goal is to broaden its audience. Believing that word of mouth is the best marketing tool, the company offers the masterwork singers two twenty-five percent off tickets to invite their friends to the concert for the first time. The promotion not only attracts new attendees, but also fills up the house in advance since the promotion must be used forty-eight hours before the concert starts (Prasser II). The discount increases the number of new attendees immediately. Meanwhile, new relationships are formed between the company and the new attendees. Experiencing a concert once can lead to a deeper and long-term relationship, if the company continues to nurture this relationship.

According to Borwick’s explanation, the term “audience development” leaves out the relationship between arts organizations and their audiences. He calls the activities that include the relationship “audience engagement”. He defines audience engagement as one kind of marketing strategy that deepens the relationship between arts organizations and their audiences, and continues over time (Borwick, “Engagement Vocabulary”). Reducing ticket prices for a first time audience will diminish the physical barriers for attendance. However, a nonprofit organization cannot use this pricing strategy alone to attract new audiences. An arts organization must also consider cost-benefit and audience
loyalty issues. In order to deepen a relationship, an arts organization has to reach an audience mentally, rather than simply physically. Engagement involves feelings and emotions that the two entities have for each other. Eventually, audience engagement grows into an emotional bond that strengthens the relationship between the audience and arts organizations. Engagement activity may initially add costs to an organization’s budget, but when an audience’s emotions are engaged, the effects are longer lasting than an experience on a purely physical level.

Although Rosewall does not explain the meaning of audience development separately from audience engagement, she discusses the powerful impact that psychological factors have on participation:

The value of understanding psychological motivations is that creating an emotional response to a product is one of the strongest ways to encourage participation. Both thinking (understanding a product’s features and desirability) and feeling (creating an emotional bond) are part of the customer’s decision-making process – it depends on the product which part comes first or lasts longer. Certainly it is always true that no matter what the product or experience, every seller wants the buyer to feel good about the purchase he or she has made (208).

For example, NWPL exhibited artifacts (photos, books, and articles) presenting the life of people from the Uitoto community. This community is represented in the performance Death of a Man. In this way, the company familiarizes the audience with an unfamiliar subject. They also conducted a talk back session which gave the spectators an opportunity to discuss their confusion or express their feelings about the performance. These activities were attempts to enrich the theatre-going experience and enhance the positive feelings of this visit in order to encourage future attendance.

The term community engagement is used by arts organizations to explain the expansion of their collaborations to other social sectors. Rosewall describes community
engagement as a picture painted by dynamic partnerships which include arts organizations, corporations, other non-profit organizations, governmental agencies, and individuals. As a result, community engagement benefits the entire community. Arts organizations whose focus is on community engagement use the arts as a tool to initiate social change or discussion of social issues. The collaboration may involve several groups from the community including schools, community organizations, and other arts organizations. Collaboration expands to areas outside the nonprofit world including the business sector. The collaborators may differ over time, depending on the needs of each situation (243). According to Borwick, the goals of community engagement are to create a relationship with the community and sustain it over time. Community engagement not only deepens the relationships and enlarges the reach of the organization, but also creates a better quality of life in the community (Borwick, “Engagement Vocabulary”).

Neos Dance Theatre has focused on community engagement since the company began. Robert Wesner, founder and artistic director of Neos Dance Theatre, learned an early lesson from other organizations that collapsed because they were relying on only one community (Wesner I). He believes in the idea of serving multiple communities. Neos has grown relationships with local businesses, government sectors, and artists in various art forms. The company calls this initiative Neos Communities, serving Akron, Mansfield, Erie, and Oberlin. In Akron, for instance, Neos annually provides dance shows through the Heinz Poll Dance Festival, First Night Akron, and other special events in collaboration with local partners including the City of Akron, The University of Akron, Akron Civic Theatre, Akron Art Museum, Akron Symphony Orchestra, and local individual artists. These collaborations have helped Neos bring in new audiences, expand
its talent and workforce, and increase its budget and visibility.

All of these strategies relate to each other as stepping-stones. Audience development is the first element that eliminates physical barriers to attendance. Audience engagement is the tactic that the organization implements after getting the audiences into the house. Community engagement may be the final step when an organization collaborates with other organizations or, like Neos, it may be the first step that leads the organization in its mission.

National Trends

Audience lifestyles and technology development have changed how an arts organization serves its customers. Online technology makes life easier for today’s busy audience member. Buying tickets and calendar management can be customized and controlled on a smartphone screen. Today’s arts audiences are well educated. They can search, consume, and compare a lot of information anytime online. This access to information has raised audiences’ expectation even higher. Since the economic recession in 2008, declining subscriptions to many arts organizations in the U.S. indicates that audience behaviors have changed. Recognizing the changes and adapting one’s strategies help arts organizations stay active and efficient. Joanne Scheff Bernstein discusses how an arts organization can respond to and benefit from these changes in her book, *Standing Room Only: Marketing Insights for Engaging Performing Arts Audiences*.

By educating our publics about the art we treasure, by being relevant to our communities, and by being sensitive to the continually changing behavior, interests, and needs of various audience segments, we can build enthusiastic and loyal audiences for the future. And by doing that, we can guarantee that art will thrive and prosper (370).
Looking at the various strategies arts organizations can implement in response to this phenomenon, Bob Harlow suggests some ideas in the collaborative study, *Building Deeper Relationships: How Steppenwolf Theatre Company Is Turning Single-Ticket Buyers into Repeat Visitors*.

Twenty-first-century Americans may be looking for a more interactive or participatory experience...in response, inventive organizations are trying to share their art in ways that help their mission and resources dovetail with the preferences and lifestyles of potential audiences (Harlow et al. viii).

In Harlow’s study, Steppenwolf Theatre Company determined that a minority of its audience actually attended the post-show discussions. For example, only 13% (16,476 of 125,607) attended during the 2008-2009 season. The company decided to extend its conversation with audiences online, allowing the attendees to investigate and explore each production as deeply as they wished. Steppenwolf’s website contains videos, a photo gallery, podcasts, and a blog, providing practical and educational information about each production. In the first year of this new strategy, Steppenwolf.org users increased 13% and 11% in the second year (Harlow et al., “Building Deeper Relationships” 37-38). The changes in Steppenwolf’s strategies responded to both the audience’s needs and the company’s mission.

In Akron, some arts organizations are interactive and up to date with their engagement strategies. For example, the Akron Art Museum recently launched a new program that increases the level of audience participation in the museum’s programming. The art museum received a grant from Knight Arts Challenge Akron to initiate the project called *Akron Art Library*, a collaborative project between the Akron Art Museum and the Akron-Summit County Public Library. This project aims to educate and engage new audiences by lending them the artworks of the local and regional artists. Akron residents
who register for a library card will be able to rent the original work and hang it in their home. This program intends to foster engagement with the arts community and expand art knowledge and appreciation to new audiences. The local economy also benefits from the program since the artists will get paid for renting their works to community members. The project will expand its connection to art collectors and international artists, engaging a larger community. (Knight Foundation, “Akron Art Museum”). Renting allows the audiences to interact with the artworks outside the museum. Educating new audiences about the artworks and how to take care of them properly will deepen the relationship between audiences, artists, and artworks on a personal level. The art museum will have a chance to introduce itself to the library’s audience. The collaboration will broaden audiences for both organizations.

Strategies in this century cannot be the same since audiences expect “participatory experience” from attending arts events. The Akron Art Museum example demonstrates how an arts organization can create a more participatory experience. 21st century strategic planning focuses on collaboration, innovative ideas, online technology, and audience participation. In order for NWPL to stay relevant in the new century, it may be helpful to develop strategies that go beyond simple demographic information. Audience motivations and barriers related to attendance provide deeper information about how audiences make the decision to attend a performance or why they decide not to attend. Research by the National Endowment for the Arts concerning motivations and barriers will be discussed in the following section.
Relationship Between Arts and Community

Many existing case studies of the relationship between the arts and the community validate the importance of the arts for the community’s well being. On the most personal level, individuals benefit from the arts in terms of entertainment, relaxation, and enlightenment. John D. Ong, Chairman Emeritus of the B.F. Goodrich Company, explains that the arts benefit worker creativity by enriching the environment.

“People who create in our companies – whether they be scientists, marketing experts or business strategists – benefit from exposure to the arts. People cannot create when they work and live in a culturally sterile environment… The economic benefits of the arts greatly transcend and outlive any of the normal cycles…that is why business invests in the arts…” (qtd. in Kemp 236).

The arts have a positive impact on urban development, economic growth, standard of living, and community pride. However, individuals and communities must support the arts as audiences, patrons, donors, and volunteers in order to produce those impacts.

The arts’ effect on neighborhood revitalization raises its value higher than just entertainment. In a city like Akron, abandoned buildings can be renovated and repurposed for arts activities in order to increase local revenues. The arts is a key element in developing a city’s plan, providing jobs, attracting new talent, and building local businesses and community amenities.

The Kimmel Center in Philadelphia provides an example of a successful revitalizing project. The Kimmel Center has revitalized the city by attracting restaurants, residences, and other arts venues to renovate vacant spaces in the neighborhood. Since the arts moved into the Broad Street area in Philadelphia, office vacancy has dropped
from 40 percent to 7 percent. This change came about with help from several sectors, such as civic entities, real estate developers, and cultural organizations. This success has been a role model for other communities with similar problems. The Guthrie Theatre in Minnesota used the Kimmel Center as a model for how to bring the arts to an area lacking economic activities. The Guthrie Theatre aimed to create economic impacts by moving into an old neighborhood near the Mississippi River. Kathy Ehrmann, a principal of Keewaydin Real Estate Advisors for The Guthrie Theatre project, states that The Kimmel Center is an excellent example of partnerships. Civic leaders and arts organizations combine mutual interests that benefit the entire community. Without an artistic vision from the arts organizations and the active participation of civic authorities, arts revitalization of the city is impossible (Kemp 137-139).

In many cities, the arts help to generate income, increase overall spending, and foster the life of the community and people who live in it. The arts represent the nature or culture of those communities “while enhancing the lives of residents and visitors alike” (Rosewall 257). What happens during Mardi Gras in New Orleans represents this phenomenon very well. The carnival, masks, costumes, and music attract visitors from all over the United States and also from outside the country. The parades and various Mardi Gras activities start about two months before the official carnival day, which is usually in February or March. During that long period income for the city from hotels, food, and alcohol is generated. Mardi Gras generated $465 million in local government revenues in 2014. Carnival helped protect New Orleans from the economic impact of the recession (Massa, “Study: Mardi Gras economic impact hits $465 million”).

The arts also serve as a means of cultural identity and community pride. An
example of an art form that has a strong cultural identity is Butoh. Butoh was born in Japan after World War II. Butoh is very well known as a form of Japanese dance theatre. It represents Japanese modern dance, humanity, nature and Japanese culture and history, and is now performed all over the world, not exclusively by Japanese dancers. (Contemporary-Dance, “Butoh”). Butoh carries Japanese cultural identity everywhere it goes.

It is evident from these examples of arts revitalization and identity formulation, that the arts are a necessary tool for Akron at this time. An article on Crain’s Cleveland Business website reports that Akron’s economic progress has fallen behind other comparable cities in the Midwest and Northeast. Akron is facing several economic threats including economic and population decline, a low rate of population growth among young professionals and immigrants, and the lack of a skilled workforce. However, the article also suggests some opportunities for the city, starting with local and homegrown businesses and applaud Akron’s leaders for initiating areas of improvement that includes strategies to foster good leadership in town, increase connections across sectors, focus on key areas for economic development, encourage urban development, and retain existing talent (Shingler, “Study: Akron’s economic progress is falling behind”).

NWPL has seen Akron undergo many changes in the last twenty five years. The company current project, The Devil’s Milk Trilogy, directly tells the story of Akron and its relationship with rubber. The trilogy intends to create pride and identity among Akron residents. The project represents the past, lessons that the city has learned, and how this story affects each resident’s identity and the city’s future. The company’s work reflects the ability of the arts to revitalize a community, which corresponds to the city leaders’
objectives. NWPL retains talent in Akron by developing local professional actors. In each production, NWPL provides artists with extra incomes and jobs that allow them to practice their craft in Akron.

Balch Street Theatre, part of the Balch Street Community Center, is located in West Hill, a quiet neighborhood between downtown Akron and the Highland Square business area. The Balch Street Community Center is a city and county owned building, housing a variety of offices and a community health club. Balch Street Theatre is often the only cultural activity happening in the neighborhood at night. The company’s activities create value for the space and the neighborhood which have the possibility to attract more activities and businesses and create a fresh perception of the West Hill area.

In conclusion, NWPL has demonstrated over the years its abilities and potential in helping to revitalize Akron. Rosewell asserts that the arts and culture have the potential “to be a tool for coping with community issues, bringing people together, and creating pride and cultural identity.” Arts and culture are “restoring and revitalizing communities by serving as a centerpiece for downtown redevelopment and cultural renewal” (Rosewall 246-247). The arts can generate economic activity and make communities more attractive and livable. “Vibrant culture districts hold strong appeal to younger employees, whose skills are seen as essential to success in many industries” (Kemp 236). The arts can fulfill basic needs such as belief in oneself and in one’s possibilities. Arts and cultural programs are a vehicle to knowledge and create a sense of identity and community. They have been used as a tool to reduce social biases against such things as ethnicity and disability, in a nonthreatening atmosphere (Kemp 241-242).

If an arts organization’s existence contributes such positive impacts to the
community, then NWPL’s presence in the Akron community is especially important. NWPL does not merely produce art for entertainment, but its aesthetic and engagement processes also directly benefit the community. However, the company’s survival depends on audience and community support, and the company itself is responsible for growing relationships with patrons and partners. Given these circumstances, it may be more impactful for NWPL to focus on a more defined audience development and engagement strategy in order to benefit better itself and the Akron community.

Motivations and Barriers Associated with Arts Attendance

An arts organization must knows its audience in order to develop and engage audiences. Data is becoming more and more important for decision-making and for evaluating whether or not an organization’s programs have served and reflected the needs of the community. Surveys are commonly used to collect data. In general, arts organizations conduct surveys primarily for recording the number of people they serve and for evaluating success. Alan Brown, a leading researcher and management consultant at WolfBrown, reflects on his firm’s latest research, _Building Capacity for Audience Research: Reflections on the Audience Research Collaborative_, by saying that “empirical research on audiences and potential audiences gained widespread legitimacy as a decision support tool” (Brown, “Newsroom”).

In this study, the researchers point out the importance of data to show funders an organization’s accountability. Funders also expect “arts organizations to know whom they serve and to measure progress against strategic goals, especially in regards to diversity” (Ratzkin, Brown, and Johnson 5). Unfortunately, none of the nonprofit
organizations in Akron interviewed for this study have a data record about their audiences or have previously conducted surveys. They indicated the same obstacle, a lack of time and resources. Collecting data is difficult for small arts organizations because of these limitations. Audience data is anecdotal, rather than harder data collected for a formal, written report. Moreover, understanding an audience’s mindset is not easy either. The process of customer decision-making is complicated. Each decision can vary according to different factors and circumstances. Motivations and personal attitudes also affect an audience member’s participation pattern (McCarthy, and Jinnett xi).

Researchers and major foundations help arts organizations understand audiences by providing an in depth information about behaviors and attitudes toward the arts. It may be advantageous for arts organizations to take advantage of this available data. These studies give a better idea about national trends in audience behavior and can help a small arts organization overcome some of its limitations.

In January 2015, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) published the research report, *When Going Gets Tough: Barriers and Motivations Affecting Arts Attendance*. This report included the results from The 2012 General Social Survey (GSS), a biennial survey of U.S. adults’ attitudes, perceptions, and opinions. NEA formulated multiple questions about attitudes or opinions in order to acquire information about motivations and barriers in attending arts events, live performances, and art exhibitions. In addition, life stages were also used to gain specific results from smaller segmented groups (*NEA Research Report #59* vii).

Why and how questions—why attend or not and how the audience values its choices—have become significant elements related to attendance. In addition to current
audiences, arts organizations might find it helpful to ask these why and how questions of their potential audiences. There are around 30 million Americans indicated as “audience in waiting” (vii). This population is interested in the arts, but does not attend because of a variety of barriers, suggesting that the quality of an arts experience cannot do anything to raise attendance if these barriers are not removed. As the number of actual arts attendees continues to decline, the 30 million in waiting become more important. Emphasizing motivations and removing barriers will not only retain the current arts audiences but also encourage and facilitate potential audiences to attend.

NEA Research Report #59 contains some interesting statistics about overall U.S. adults and their arts participation behaviors. At least once in the past 12 months, 53.6% or 126 million U.S. adults attended an art exhibition or live performance (including music, theatre, or dance). An additional 13.3% or 31 million U.S. adults were interested in one of those arts events but did not follow through with attendance. Socializing with friends or family members was the number one motivation for attending, mentioned by 76% of attendees. Over half of attendees participated in the arts with one or more companions. Lack of time was a common barrier, especially for adults and parents with young children.

Details associated with race, socioeconomic status, and class identity review that people have different motivations and barriers. The study reports that racial/ethnic minorities and first-generation immigrants, Non-Hispanic Blacks and African Americans, and Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders are most likely to attend performances to support community events or organizations. Mexican-Americans (42%) and African Americans (32%) often indicated not having someone to go with as a barrier (NEA
While demographics may tell a lot about audience behavior, different life stages can cause different decision-making by people within the same demographic. The 25 – 35 year old demographic might attend a performance in order to socialize with friends. That preference will change if they have children at home or have limited budgets because of buying a new house or paying for school. Life circumstances are many and create sub-categories of motivations and barriers for each group. By understanding the needs and obstacles of subset groups, arts organizations can address more diverse and more specific needs of audiences at the same time. The key findings from the *NEA Research Report #59* explain how life stages affect attendance.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Life Stages</th>
<th>Young Adult’s Motivations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Young adults who are in school</td>
<td>• Experiencing high-quality art</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young adults who are <em>not</em> in school</td>
<td>• Supporting community organizations or events</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young adults with no partner, spouse, or children</td>
<td>• Socializing with friends and family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young adults with children</td>
<td>• Learning new things</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2.1 Motivations of Young Adults in Different Life Stages

The lives of young adults, age 18 to 34, revolve around two major circumstances, education and family life. The researchers report that young adults who are in school or pursuing higher education attend arts activities at a higher percentage. Two reasons for this higher percentage might be taste and preference of wanting to learn or the advantage of student priced tickets. There is no significant difference in barriers between those attending school and those not attending school. Ticket prices are a common barrier for
all young adults, especially single young adults. The researchers imply that this is because one person, typically, tends to have less household income than two (30-31).

Knowing the audience’s characteristics and values may be important for an arts organization. These two elements will guide the methods that the arts organization may use to connect with each age group. Bernstein explains that people age 18 – 34 are “generation Y”, they are “technology and personalized” oriented. She states that generation Y is “armed with smartphones, laptops, and other gadgets”. Online technology that generation Y has grown up with facilitates their lives through online and mobile communication. Text messages and email definitely respond to the “fast-track” lifestyle of this generation. Not only easy, but fast and flexible, are the words that arts organizations might find it helpful to integrate in their marketing strategies in order to reach generation Y. “Relevant” is also important attribute, since generation Y pays attention to the value of the product, not the price alone (Standing Room Only 72).

Spouses and partners change one’s pattern of attendance. NEA Research Report #59 states that a married couple is “more likely to attend the arts with their spouses or partners, and they are also significantly less likely to attend with friends or alone.” The researchers note that women have a great deal of influence on their spouses’ or partners’ attendance behavior (NEA Research Report #59 31-32).

Children are a strong influence in changing parents’ attendance behaviors. NEA Research Report #59 shows that young adults with children attend the arts 13% less often than those with no children. The major barrier for them is time. However, their motivations to attend vary according to the age of their children and whether or not the event is family-friendly (31-34).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Life Conditions</th>
<th>Young Adult’s Motivations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parents with children</td>
<td>• Socializing with friends and family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Learning new things</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Celebrating cultural heritage</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Low cost</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents without children</td>
<td>• Socializing and low cost of an event</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents with teenagers</td>
<td>• Seeing high-quality art</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2.2 Changing Parents’ Behaviors Affected by Children

Another important element that affects children’s participation in the arts is the education level of their parents. *NEA Research Report #59* states that “…respondents with less than a bachelor’s degree are significantly less likely to attend art exhibitions and performances overall” and that parents holding only bachelor’s degrees are less likely to attend the arts with their children. The report goes on to show that both parents with lower than and higher than bachelor’s degrees are more likely to attend the arts with their children. “These differences in children’s co-attendance by parental educational level are sufficiently stark to warrant future investigation” (34). The report implies that the cost associated with attending the arts events might be the real obstacle for parents who attained lower education levels. It’s not because they are not interested in, or do not see the importance of the arts, but the cost of attending restricts them from going. The respondents with lower education level indicate that learning new things is a major motivation to attend. In addition, the statistics show that they are “more likely to cite low cost or free admission among reasons for arts attendance,” with 63% of them compared to 37.5% of parents with a higher education level (33-34).

Audiences with spouses or partners and with young children or teenagers are
likely to be 20 to 45 years old. According to Bernstein’s segmentation, they are a combination of generation X and generation Y. She describes generation X as “more ethnically diverse and better educated than the Baby Boomers.” They have been exposed to computer technology from its beginnings. The values held by generation X are more about being “self-sufficient” and include a “work to live” mentality (Standing Room Only 71). The way to reach generation X might be through the same channels as generation Y, but by customizing the messages and emphasizing life values.

The NEA’s last group of respondents is the empty – nester and retiree. Empty-nesters are “adults aged 45 and older…who no longer have children residing at home” (NEA Research Report #59 35). Retirees’ major motivation for attending the arts is different from empty – nesters. Retirees tend to attend events to experience high quality art. A reason for this might be their long time familiarity with the arts, causing high expectations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Life Stages</th>
<th>Motivations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Empty – nesters</td>
<td>• Supporting community organizations or events</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retirees</td>
<td>• Experiencing high quality art</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2.3 Motivations of the Empty – Nesters and Retirees

These two groups experience similar barriers if there is a difficulty accessing the location. Health problems and needing someone to transport them to events can be barriers for the upper ages of this group (35). They are also called “Baby Boomers” and described as an “educated, wealthy, and loyal” segment (Bernstein, “Standing Room Only” 69), an ideal arts supporter. From statistics, about half of today’s arts patrons are
Baby Boomers (Lester, “What Will Your Audience Look Like in 2020?”).

From the NEA report and other research, it is clear that age and life stages strongly influence audience attendance patterns and behavior. The details of motivations and barriers are complex. There are some clues of characteristics and interests of each segment which can guide arts organizations in how to engage the needs of diverse audiences. In order to attract several segments and meet their different needs, audience development and engagement strategies should be diversified. The generation X of today will replace the Baby Boomers in the near future. Later in this study, survey results from NWPL’s performances of *Death of a Man* will reveal some information that is different from *NEA Research Report #59*. These differences may be a sign indicating that motivations and barriers vary in a small, specific community or alternative arts form. It will be helpful for NWPL to be aware of how changeable and diverse their audiences are. Addressing the right motivations and barriers is complicated and can be exhausting, however without doing this basic work, the organization may waste time and resources.
CHAPTER III

THREE ORGANIZATIONS BACKGROUND

CATAC and NWPL

The New World Performance Laboratory (NWPL), a part of The Center for Applied Theatre and Active Culture (CATAC), has been presenting performances in Akron for almost 25 years. The company has been active in dealing with global conflicts and community issues especially since the collaborative project, *Rethinking Race: The Color Line Project*, with The University of Akron in 2009. Projects that engage the community continue, the most recent being a long-term project called *The Devil’s Milk Trilogy*. The trilogy involves the history of Akron and the city’s relationship with rubber, demonstrating again that NWPL understands and is concerned about Akron and genuinely grasps how theater can be connected to the community.

NWPL and CATAC are related. NWPL was founded first. In February of 2005, CATAC was incorporated in order to “provide an administrative umbrella for NWPL” and in December 2006 received 501(c)(3) charitable status (“CATAC”).

CATAC’s mission is “to establish a forum for community engagement and educational outreach through collaboration with emerging and established artists and the creation, production and presentation of a diverse array of theatre, music, dance, and exhibitions that affirms the intrinsic value of all cultures and explores the transformative power of the arts for the greater Akron community. CATAC seeks to provide a home base for the research and performances of New World Performance Laboratory and nurture emerging local artists and those of
international reputation creating new work and experimenting with new forms of expression (“CATAC”).

NWPL’s mission statement is “to create theatre events and pedagogical programs, to research performance techniques from around the world, and to develop a contemporary performance methodology for culturally diverse theatre artists (“NWPL”).

One way to look at this relationship is that CATAC is an administrator while NWPL is an actor. NWPL works to support CATAC’s mission in terms of engaging community issues, being a theatre for research, and providing performance ecology work sessions in order to serve as an educational resource. NWPL can be considered as one example of CATAC’s products. CATAC continues its mission to “nurture emerging local artists,” supporting and administrating other small local theatre companies in Akron, such as Ma’Sue Productions, an African American based theatre company. CATAC’s operating support makes it possible for Ma’Sue Productions to present contemporary African American performing arts and cultural diversity events to the Akron community.

CATAC and NWPL have been collaborating with and hosting other theatre companies which perform in a variety of styles and come from other communities. For instance, CATAC collaborated with The University of Akron Theatre Arts Program to present Catherine Wheels Theatre Company, a troupe from Scotland, performing Lifeboat at the Paul A. Daum Theatre. The company also hosted the Seattle-based ensemble Akropolis Performance Lab’s (APL) production of The Glas Nocturne at Balch Street Theatre (“Collaborations”). CATAC’s mission for community engagement was also demonstrated by the group’s collaboration with the Center for Applied Drama and Autism (CADA): they provided classroom space until CADA found its own space.
NWPL often provides a two-week long *Performance Ecology Work Session* in summer as an educational program. The session includes basic training for actors including physical exercises, voice work, and creative work. “Performance Ecology is an exploratory structure that serves to develop the actor’s physical, emotional and imaginative resources” (“Summer Theatre Workshop”). This session is more than a workshop. The program is well-structured to cover the main tools that an actor needs in contemporary, multi-cultural performance. Performance Ecology also involves exploration and discovery of ensemble technique and the surrounding space, both indoors and outdoors.

Performance Ecology is an example of NWPL’s work that reflects its mission to research performance techniques and develop a contemporary performance methodology in a culturally diverse environment. According to an interview with co-artistic director James Slowiak, NWPL is a theatre of research and the acting ensemble is the center of the work. Slowiak explains that for a long time, NWPL was considered a European style theatre, more for intellectual purposes than for entertainment. The work starts from questions, both in acting/directing techniques and community issues. The production is a research topic that the ensemble agrees to explore in depth (Slowiak I).

The ensemble style of work is affiliated with the company’s core values. Slowiak emphasizes that “the actor is the center of the work” when talking about the core values of the company. In my experience with how NWPL works, the director does not direct the work, but rather facilitates and works along with the ensemble. Several ideas and thoughts are brainstormed during rehearsal to find the best solution for the particular production. The production is a research study that, Slowiak says, “takes a bit longer to
try things, operates outside of the mainstream where costs and such are so high that you have to work quickly” (Slowiak I). Still, the ensemble often has a deadline for open rehearsals where the work in progress is presented to the public as a way of developing the piece. The result is a production created and developed by the ensemble. The continued development of the work can be seen through each open rehearsal.

The members of the ensemble are flexible. Members may choose to drop off or continue, depending on timing and other obligations. NWPL, Slowiak says, trains the young actor as an apprentice. “After a number of years, they (the apprentices) will move on and no longer be an apprentice” (Slowiak I). Currently, NWPL has a group of professional actors and a group of young actors creating the work together. The designers and technicians are also becoming more and more integrated into the ensemble.

The work of CATAC and NWPL definitely reflects the company’s goals. As mentioned on the CATAC/NWPL website, the company aims to be a cultural center for the Akron community, to provide training opportunities and serve as an educational resource for diverse populations, to use theatre as a tool to create cultural change, to represent Akron as a center of performance research, and to promote the diversity of performing art and humanity ("CATAC").

Neos Dance Theatre

The name Neos comes from the Greek word, neo- which means new. Robert Wesner, co-founder and artistic director of Neos Dance Theatre, uses the word to motivate himself and the company. He defines the word as an active way: “An action to start something new, to explore what dance is within the concept of theatre. Neos Dance
Theatre is a sense of developing the widest range of repertoire that can explore and share a huge diversity of offerings to the audiences” (Wesner III). The name Neos well suits the dynamic of the company. Neos Dance Theatre first started performing in Akron four years ago and received nonprofit status in December 2012. The company is young as a nonprofit organization and new to Akron audiences. However, Neos has demonstrated its ability to serve and to survive in several communities. The company’s credibility and success are reflected in its budget records. Within a very few years of receiving nonprofit status, its revenue grew from $45,724 in 2012 to $181,292 in 2013, and the company sustains the same amount of revenue in the latest year.

The story behind this success is the idea of serving multiple communities. Neos started in its hometown of Mansfield, Ohio, and reached out to Akron, Oberlin, and Erie. Connecting with multiple communities reduces the risk from dependence on a single community for support (See chapter II). “Collaboration and support are from more diverse areas. Local business wants to support and emphasize the art in a particular area” (Wesner I). Each city has different programs depending on available resources and the needs of the community. For example, Neos provides education-related programs in Oberlin through Oberlin Dance Intensive. In Akron, the company works collaboratively with The University of Akron’s School of Dance, Theatre, and Arts Administration. Neos does not provide the same kind of programming in Mansfield. Events in Mansfield are more likely to be community events such as Ballet @ the Brickyard and Boots and Ballet. Mansfield does not have the same educational institutions as Oberlin and Akron. The two Mansfield dance events “have become cultural staples for the community” (“Neos in
Mansfield”). Neos’s programs are customized to fit with community culture and resources while remaining true to the organization’s mission, which is:

To advance dance related education by student training, intensive summer study, and master classes; raise awareness of the dance arts; culturally enrich Northern Ohio through performance of high quality dance by obtaining and presenting the widest range of repertoire possible (“Board & Mission”).

The company’s educational programs seem to be a core element for Neos. In fact, the opportunity for educational programming arrived as a result of producing high quality art works that “feed and build the culture in any particular culture that the company is within” (Wesner II). Neos also provides classes and training within the community in order to serve the ultimate goal, the whole community having art performances that enrich its culture and the lives of people in it.

Oberlin Dance Intensive explains how Neos links its programs with its mission. Neos provides a week-long dance class in collaboration with the Oberlin College Dance Studios. Students interact with professional dancers. From there, students learn repertoire from professionals and prepare for the showcase performance at the end of the week. As a result, there are opportunities for Neos to try new repertoire, for young dancers to perform on stage, and for the community to see the results of training. “The dance intensive class is a format that the company adapts to different communities” (Wesner II).

In Akron, Neos uses the same pattern, an educational program with institutional collaborators. Students learn work ethics and create a work with professional dancers and a guest choreographer. “Collaboration and educational experiences help the students develop and achieve. The time on stage is a development of different activities” (Wesner II). By the time the students have developed and trained as professionals, they will be ready for professional venues and can perform at the Heinz Poll Summer Dance Festival.
The Akron showcase of classes serves as an example of Neos’s products, collaborative works, and the possibilities of dance education and is visible to the community.

Wesner describes his company’s works as “you do not know what to expect” (Wesner II). The company tries to balance classical and contemporary dance, presenting a classical vocabulary of ballet and performing it slightly differently in the 21st century. The different dance style creates a unique picture and “internal deep impact” for the audiences (Wesner II). Neos dancers have a core classical dance repertoire as a foundation and are able to develop that repertoire through Neos classical repertoire or through other performing arts oriented disciplines. This adaptability supports Neos in collaborating with other groups regardless of art forms, such as local hip-hop dancers, graffiti artists, urban/pop musicians, the Akron Symphony Orchestra, and the Akron Art Museum.

Every Neos activity in Akron has involved collaboration and partnership. For example, the production of *Snow White and the Magic Mirror* was a collaborative work between Neos and The University of Akron. *Count…the Legend of Dracula* has been successful through support from the Akron Civic Theatre. Neos performed on *First Night Akron* in collaboration with Downtown Akron Partnership and the City of Akron. In the 2016-2017 Season, Neos started collaborations with two new organizations, the Akron Art Museum and the Akron Symphony Orchestra. Collaboration, rather than working in isolation, is “empowering” for Neos (Wesner II). It increases funding resources, human resources, and marketing efficiency, filling a gap that Neos could not accomplish alone.
Summit Choral Society

Central Summit County Choral Society, better known in Akron as the Summit Choral Society (SCS), has been operating for 26 years. The choral company was founded in 1990 by Dr. Frank C. Jacobs and his wife Arlene Jacobs to establish a choral music singers’ community. The Masterworks Chorale and the Children’s Choir Program have served as an educational program, welcoming and training singers of all ages and backgrounds. SCS’s mission is “to produce and present quality performances of distinguished choral music for the enrichment, enjoyment, and education of its singers, patrons, and the greater Akron community” (“About Us”). The company strongly believes in the positive impact of choral music to enrich lives and minds.

Educational programs are the main offerings of SCS and the concerts are the results of these classes. The pathways of choral music and music education contain the core values that SCS tries to build through three educational programs: the Children’s Choir Program, the Masterworks Chorale, and SCS Choral Scholars and Choral Conducting Fellowship. “Music education is the most important part for the Children’s Choir Program” (Prasser I). Students from grades one to twelve are placed in choir levels: beginning singer, intermediate choir, advanced choir, or performance choir. Each student has to learn music theory, make progress, and go through all four levels. As a result, the students come out with very solid music training. The Masterworks Chorale consists of multi-generational singers. The singers rehearse and learn techniques before performing in the concert season. The most recent educational programs are the two scholarship programs, SCS Choral Scholars and Choral Conducting Fellowship, which serve as a bridge between the Masterworks Chorale and the Children’s Choir Program. SCS
provides scholarships for college students through contributions and grant support. The scholarship programs bring new faces and new dynamics to the choir. “With adding young students, the organization is able to attract another fifteen young professionals from college. This changes the look and the sound of the organization” (Prasser I).

SCS just passed a critical transition, the retirement of its founding artistic director, Dr. Frank C. Jacobs. SCS is now under the musical direction of the new artistic director, Dr. Marie Bucoy-Calavan. This is a tremendous change since the same artistic director drove the company for 25 years. Fortunately, SCS planned well for its succession and transferred the operation to the new phase smoothly. Currently, Dr. Bucoy-Calavan is the director of Choral Studies at The University of Akron. Her skills, intuition, and active personality make SCS proud and excited to introduce its new artistic director to the community.

Christmas Candlelight Concerts are one of SCS events that “are expected” by Akron audiences (Prasser I). These traditional, annual concerts feature the Masterworks Chorale and the Children’s choir performing together. Other annual concerts are *A Concert for the Holidays* and the *Sound of Spring* concert. These concerts provide additional opportunities for students in the Children’s Choir Program to perform on stage as professional singers. In the 2016-2017 Season, SCS’s Masterworks Chorale and the performance choir are invited to sing with the Akron Symphony Orchestra in *Mendelssohn’s Elijah* concert, joining the other two prominent Akron choirs, Akron Symphony Chorus and University of Akron Choruses. The performance choir has been invited to perform at the National Memorial Day Choral Festival in Washington D.C. in
May 2017. SCS’s reputation is well known nationally and Akron, Ohio, is attached to the name SCS everywhere it goes.

The three arts organizations in this study are performing arts within different disciplines. Each has its own core values and background that enable differences in strategies and abilities to engage audiences. Educational programs are one common outreach strategy. Educational programs seem to work well in order to increase young audiences and the company’s reputation. The most valuable lesson learned from the interviews with the three company representatives concerns the existence of cooperation rather than competition among local nonprofit organizations. The way in which local nonprofits help and support each other is shown in the number of collaborations and partnerships engaged in by these companies. All three of the organizations studied have been collaborating continuously with other organizations and have expressed the intention to seek more such opportunities in the future.
CHAPTER IV
DEVELOPMENT AND ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES OF THREE AKRON ARTS ORGANIZATIONS

Past NWPL Audience and Community Engagement Activities and Future Plans

Though NWPL has been based in Akron for 24 years, the company performed in the Cleveland area before changing its focus to Akron. Part of NWPL’s evolution is its shift from Cleveland to Akron in 2003. This decision was important since NWPL was better known in Cleveland and Europe than in its hometown. Now that NWPL has obtained a permanent space in Akron the organization can form clearer strategies to bring people in and to decrease an initial confusion that NWPL was part of The University of Akron (Slowiak I). The company had already started its outreach toward the Akron community by participating in community events such as Halloween parties and festivals in the University Park neighborhood in order to present the company’s name and members to the community.

Educational Element

A talkback session after performances is NWPL’s main in-house audience engagement activity. NWPL has been conducting expert-led talkback conversations as well as having exhibitions for some performances. These two strategies emphasize the
company’s mission to educate the community. The company invites the audiences to share thoughts, feelings, or questions about the performance. The talkback session is helpful to audiences not only for facilitating a clearer understanding of the performance, but also for provoking thoughts and concerns. For example, many audiences shared the same thoughts about suffering in the global supply chain and concerns about changing their consumer habits during the *Death of a Man* talkback sessions. The conversations certainly influence people’s thinking and provoke either agreement or argument. However, the point of the talkback session is for audiences to have a chance to hear different reactions and to revise their own thoughts. NWPL expects that this strategy can attract audiences by engaging them in casual and open conversation. Recently NWPL published a short documentary, *Searching for the Sources*, supported by a travel grant from the Network of Ensemble Theaters (NET). The documentary describes the journey to Colombia and the Amazon made by NWPL co-artistic directors, Jairo Cuesta and James Slowiak in January 2016. This journey was part of the research and development for the performance *Death of a Man*, and the film documents NWPL’s meeting with the Uitoto tribe (Cofield, “NET/TEN Shareback: New World Performance Laboratory-Searching for the Sources”). The company uses the documentary as an educational tool to inform and engage audiences.

**Collaboration**

Collaboration with other theatre groups and organizations always yields different and more diverse audiences for NWPL. Collaborations with Ma’Sue Productions bring African American audiences to the venue. NWPL has participated in other events which
relate thematically to its work. For example, NWPL presented *Virginia Woolf’s* *Orlando* by Sarah Ruhl, a gender-bending play, during the Cleveland-Akron Gay Games in 2014. As part of the Rethinking Race forum at The University of Akron, NWPL performed *Death of a Man*. These two collaborations brought in many new and younger audiences.

**Future Plans**

Next year, the 25th anniversary of NWPL, the company plans to reintroduce works from its repertoire to the community. The company has a rough plan to bring back two performances and showcase particular members of the ensemble. Definitely, NWPL plans to present the entire *Devil’s Milk Trilogy* at Balch Street Theatre, and take the production to the community by performing at the university, community centers, and Akron Civic Theatre. In the next couple of years, NWPL plans “a rust belt tour” of the *Devil’s Milk Trilogy* to other cities like Akron, such as Detroit and Dayton. Slowiak mentions the feedback he received from *Death of a Man’s* tour to Chicago. He found that the audience did not experience the production as a local story, but saw it as dealing with universal issues (Slowiak II). This feedback shows that audiences in different communities can make connections from seeing the performance. Presenting NWPL in other venues, within and beyond Akron, may help NWPL engage new audiences who normally participate in activities there or already have feelings attached to those places.
Neos Programming, Collaboration, and Visibility

Like other small nonprofit organizations, Neos has limited staff and limited time to accomplish a number of day-to-day tasks. Neos has only one artistic director as a full-time staff, functioning in several positions, from website updating to writing grant proposals. With these limitations, it is difficult for a company to focus on every activity including developing and engaging audiences. “The biggest part of developing who Neos is in the community is . . . continuing to be available, to be visible, and to collaborate with other organizations” (Wesner III).

The best way to engage audiences is hard to define even though strategies in programming, collaborating, and community presence clearly work well for Neos in terms of broadening its audiences. Statistically, the number of attendees at Neos event has been increasing. The estimated number of attendees recorded from both paid and free events was 15,000 in the 2013-2014 season, 35,000 in the 2014-2015 season, and 17,000 in the 2015-2016 season. The dramatic rise during 2014-2015 was due to Neos’s participation in a celebration at Playhouse Square in Cleveland. As an independent dance company, Neos first introduced itself to Akron audiences four years ago by performing at the Akron Civic Theatre and EJ Thomas Hall. Becoming a viable arts company with strong community relationships takes time. Working with partners like Akron Civic Theatre or The University of Akron is an investment for Neos’s long-term goal, which is to serve a larger population and develop relationships with foundations, individuals, and sponsors in Akron (Wesner III).
Neos’s dance style and production design affect its audience’s demographics. Attendees between 30 to 50 are more likely to attend and enjoy Neos works that “go from classical music to heavy metal music” (Wesner III). Neos continues exploring how to serve broader audiences. Currently, the company implements the idea of having everything for every age in one show by using video projection and by performing the widest range of dance styles from classic, contemporary, and totally new exploratory choreography. Programs often include community members in order to engage larger groups of audiences. In building audiences through the educational program, the company can predict that there will be a number of friends and families attending the show. Increased participation in the production produces increased online marketing, which increases traffic at the performances. More people in the community become involved. “Neos will try different things to see what can be a hook in Akron” (Wesner III).

An educational-type program is designed for engaging audiences. At the end of each instructional unit, students perform in a public showcase. Neos also highlights the value of professional dancers by occasionally showing only professionals on stage. The student showcase paired with professional dancers exposes audiences to higher levels of dance and encourages more attendance. The variety of program levels helps the organization engage more diverse audiences and address different needs.
Collaboration

According to Wesner, collaboration is a give-and-take activity (III). Sometimes it means a sacrifice on financial returns, but collaboration with larger organizations provides Neos the visibility of performing for larger audiences and the opportunity to engage a more diverse demographic. Besides that, multiple companies complement each other’s needs, such as workforce, artistic talent, and funding resources. For instance, collaborating with Akron Civic Theatre benefits Neos in box office management, online marketing, and serving different demographics. All of these activities are impossible for a small organization to undertake without collaborators.

The way Neos works in collaboration is to create “a full circle impact” (Wesner III). Neos always plans for the mutual benefit of the two organizations. The beginning of the process includes proposing ideas that reflect both organizations’ missions and art forms and writing grants in conjunction with the other collaborators. The planning process builds trust between the partners.

Neos’s collaborators in Akron are diverse and include educational institutions, government services, and arts organizations. Neos connects with the educational outreach program of The University of Akron–Dance Institute. Dance student participation, along with guests from the community, allows Neos to perform larger productions, such as The Nutcracker, Dracula, and the Heinz Poll Summer Dance Festival. These bigger productions attract more audiences and demonstrate to the community the results of the educational programs. Since the start of 2016, Neos also has had an office at the university. This location brings Neos closer to The University of Akron students and
accelerates the level of engagement by “being a practical learning resource for arts, dance, and administrative students” (Wesner I).

Neos’s relationship with the City of Akron has been built through the Heinz Poll Summer Dance Festival, generating trust and confidence among the public. The company’s outstanding job of demonstrating and highlighting the benefits of their works led to an invitation to become part of the City of Akron’s offerings by providing a training program for children. This training program provides an opportunity for Neos to engage the younger generation and their parents. The partnership with the City of Akron also increases the company’s credibility.

These relationships have led to more and more collaborations with other local organizations such as the Akron Symphony Orchestra and the Akron Art Museum. There is always a crossover of audiences between any two collaborators. Opportunities arise as a result of Neos’s reputation and nature. “Being available and adaptable” are the keys that make Neos match the needs of its partners (Wesner III). Neos’s collaboration efforts started simply, growing from personal conversations with Wesner and from people referring other people, but growth has been supported by a large amount of visible works.

In conclusion, having well-known organizations as partners creates trust and breaks down audiences’ hesitation to patronize a small organization. Even though there is no clear determination about what exactly brings in an audience, each partner involved in a collaboration should be considered as having an influence on audience participation. For example, the Heinz Poll Summer Dance Festival has a long history that attracts people; but specific dance companies and unique dance styles also have followers. Neos found a completely different demographic attending its performance during the
Neos has built a part of its new audiences through the company’s collaborations. The Lila Wallace-Reader’s Digest Fund published the report, *Building Audiences: Stories from America’s Theaters*, after it distributed $25 million to 42 nonprofit theatres all over the country for developing their strategies in expanding and diversifying audiences. “Collaborations are vital to winning trust” (3). The Berkeley Repertory Theatre has learned that “its collaborations with the Asian American Theater Company—from co-productions to joint subscription packages—were crucial in building a bridge to the Asian American community” (3). The crossover of audiences happens more easily when the trust between partners is proved, and friendships and partnerships are already formed.

These strategies take time to plan and time to analyze the result. Neos works hard throughout the year to make opportunities in collaboration happen. As Wesner mentions, collaboration is a give-and-take, an investment for long-term goals. Neos sometimes must rely on grants in order to cover losses on ticket sales (Wesner II). The company is doing everything possible to be visible in the community while keeping within a reasonable budget. Eventually, Neos will have a format in which it can select the collaborations it wishes. The company expects a lower financial sacrifice and healthier budget that will allow it to have more productions and still maintain operating costs.

**Visibility**

Neos is active and smart about presenting its works in front of the public. The company sees this as an investment “to grow the audiences or to prove that Neos is
engaging with the community which then could grow the opportunities to fundraise, to receive a grant, or any other revenue earning” (Wesner III).

The key of being visible is performing at “the place that attracts many people and is a firm part of what Akron is identified with” (Wesner III). Neos puts this strategy into a year plan, finding a way to be a part of each event, such as *First Night Akron* at Lock 3, fundraising events at the Akron Civic Theatre, and performing with the Akron Symphony at E.J. Thomas Hall. These are prominent venues for Akron residents.

Efforts at increasing visibility are driven by the vision of the artistic director, Robert Wesner. He also makes personal appearances in public, representing himself and the company. For example, Wesner has submitted a proposal to present at PechaKucha Akron, a talk and presentation format for sharing thoughts, ideas, and works. Internally, he tries to attend different types of events in order to introduce Neos to diverse audiences.

**How Neos Engages the Audiences and Community without Data**

So far, no survey or other type of data collection has been done of Neos’s audiences. It is also hard to gauge which audiences are purely Neos followers, since every show is a collaborative project. The question is this: how can the company plan strategies and programs without knowing its audiences? Robert Wesner uses a lot of intuition and feelings to decide what will work in the community, while taking into account grant opportunities and collaborator’s goals. The idea is still collaborative, balancing the partner’s and community’s needs with the company’s needs. “What works for Neos and partners is a key of keeping Neos present in the community, but not solely shaping the work and how I (Wesner) feel what will have the most impact in the
community” (Wesner III). Feedback from foundations and community leaders helps Neos identify what the community really needs. “Those things are determining what is the pulse of the community” (Wesner III). The company also leans toward what will work for the partners and achieves that with its works. For instance, the Neos educational program and the showcase of students benefit The University of Akron as they accelerate the impact of the university on students and promote the university’s visibility to the community.

Summit Choral Society Program Development, Collaboration, Branding, and Relationship Building

The programs offered by Summit Choral Society (SCS) follow a different format from NWPL. The students and singers of SCS pay to participate in the classes and perform at the concerts, while NWPL’s actors are paid a small stipend. Choral music fans number among SCS’s audiences, but mostly, concerts attract either friends or families of the singers. For this reason, students and singers are considered the primary market for SCS. Summit Choral Society develops its engagement strategies to appeal to diverse participants for its classes, which relate to the audiences who come to the concert at the end. In 2014, the Christmas Candlelight Concerts’ total audiences were around 1,200. Less than a year after engagement activities were implemented, the number of audiences increased to around 1,500 (Prasser III).

SCS just underwent an important transition after long-time artistic director, Frank Jacob, decided to retire from his position in Spring 2015. It is typical of choral music that the singers are loyal to a specific artistic director (Prasser I). Since Jacob left, the
numbers of choral masterwork singers decreased. There were around 60 masterwork singers at the time he was the artistic director, but the number dropped to 39 singers after he left the position. The children’s program followed a similar pattern, with low enrollment in Fall 2014. With a total of 78 students, 39 children were in the touring choir leaving only 39 in other choir classes (Prasser III). SCS has had to deal with this situation, not only seeking a new artistic director, but also building the singers’ trust in the company’s transformation. The transition has brought many changes to the organization, including a new artistic director, development of a new curriculum, and enhancement of the way SCS engages young professional singers and community.

Program Development

SCS has put serious effort into increasing enrollment in its classes. The organization realized that relating choral programs to the local school curriculum is important. SCS staff worked with schoolteachers to rebuild the choral program curriculum. Because music and art classes had been cut from local schools, SCS’s plan to address the needs of extracurricular activities was warmly welcomed. SCS added less intense musicianship classes for students, divided classes into five levels, and provided opportunity for students to develop more evenly. SCS emphasizes how choral music can benefit teachers by providing documented research such as *The Chorus Impact Study: How Children, Adults, and Communities Benefit from Choruses*. This research, derived from parents’ and teachers’ survey data, shows evidence that choral music helps students perform better in the classroom in other subjects besides music class, such as mathematics and English. Life skills, such as creativity, memory, discipline, and self-
esteem also improve among the children who are in a chorus (11-18). The new choral music curriculum includes music literacy and emphasizes the residual impacts of choral music in order to build trust with teachers and community. In Spring 2015, the number of students in the children’s choir program increased to 151. The number rose to 178 in Fall 2015. This year SCS expects 200 students in its classes.

Collaboration

The new artistic director has implemented collaborations between SCS and other local arts organizations, including Neos Dance Theatre and the Akron Symphony Orchestra. Choral music has begun to work with other art forms in Akron for the first time. At the end-of-season event in 2016, choral music was incorporated with ballroom dancing and ballet in a casual atmosphere with an open bar and hors d’oeuvres at Tangier, a local restaurant/nightclub. SCS invented an interactive experience for the attendees by giving them an opportunity to take a short dance lesson and join the professional dancers on stage. The interactive experiment went very well and received such good feedback that the company plans to do this engagement activity as an annual event. The Akron Symphony Orchestra has commissioned SCS choruses to perform in Mendelssohn’s Elijah concert in May 2017. Collaboration with the symphony provides opportunities for the SCS masterworks chorale and for students in the children’s program to learn the symphony’s repertoire. Moreover, this collaboration encourages SCS audiences and Akron Symphony audiences to attend each other’s performances.
Branding

The new artistic director, Marie Bucoy-Calavan, exerts a strong influence over the changes in SCS. Her charming, active, and professional personality brings a new image to the company. As mentioned before, in choruses, the singers typically commit to a particular artistic director, so there may come a time when SCS will consist of more older people than younger people. This situation raises the question of whether young professionals and college students will find a place in the choir in the future (Prasser I). Now SCS is focusing on recruiting in new faces and voices. Bucoy-Calavan’s experience with church choirs and university choirs, and her position as the Director of Choral Studies at The University of Akron all provide the perfect elements to initiate the SCS Choral Scholars, Choral Conducting Fellowship, and Arts Administration Internship. These three new educational programs aim to attract young professionals and change the look of the company.

The scholar programs started in Fall 2015 and the impact of the programs has appeared already. The strategy for adding young students has allowed SCS to attract 15 more young professionals to the masterworks chorale. “That changes the look and the sound of the organization” (Prasser I). In Fall 2015, SCS rebuilt the masterworks chorale members from 39 to 55, increasing to 65 at the end of the year. The corresponding change in audience demographics could be seen at the end of last season’s event. Executive Director Karen Prasser analyzed the audience’s feedback from the Dance with Me event and determined that there were many more young audience members attending the event than had been seen before (Prasser II). Part of this increase was because of the
collaboration that included dance and choral music. Again, it was another of SCS’s conscious attempts to engage both young audiences and the larger community.

The Conducting Fellowship, Choral Scholar, and the internship program provide a professional employment experience and build resumes for college students. The Choral Scholar receives a scholarship and membership discount to participate in SCS activity. In return, they have to organize the concert preview and give the audience an introduction to what they are going to hear. This strategy connects the audience with the singers, attracts young audiences by featuring young talent, and serves as a community service program at the same time.

**Relationship Building**

Engagement activities enhance audiences’ emotional attachment to the organization. SCS has shown special concern about this issue during its transition. Relationships with parents and teachers are significant in terms of creating word of mouth recommendations. Parents often suggest SCS experiences to their neighbors and teachers advise students to attend the choral musicianship classes (Prasser II). The organization engages these people by increasing audience involvement and creating a good experience during performances.

The involvement of parent volunteers is one approach to building community relationships. Parents are responsible for organizing the reception at the concerts and they manage aspects of the touring concert. SCS started the idea of “sharing a favorite holiday dessert,” inviting parents to bring their favorite food to share with others after the concert. The conversations while eating these small treats create relationships between audience
members and the organization. This strategy creates a sense of belonging and being a part of something important. Relationships with teachers are also important for SCS. The organization engages teachers by sending out 400 invitation letters, inviting the teachers to attend the concert and to see how choral music benefits students. SCS uses this evidence to create trust and obtain the support from teachers.

SCS is always concerned about audience perception towards the organization. There was a time when SCS worked to dissolve its elite image by bringing the children’s choir performance to common public areas such as the cafeteria in their office building. In Fall 2015, a couple months after Bucoy-Calavan’s official hiring, SCS expanded its public receptions to the masterworks concerts, providing an opportunity for the audiences to meet and talk with the conductor, choruses, and orchestra. Prasser believes that it is critical for the arts that the audiences enjoy the high-end creation and they also have opportunities to know the conductor and performers. “They feel the connection already” (Prasser II). The organization puts the human connectors in place and engages the audiences through good relationships.

Conclusion

Local arts organizations have their own strategies in developing and engaging audiences according to organizational behavior, resources, skills and needs. The Neos and SCS case studies show that building trust is essential. Every engagement activity impacts audiences on the emotional level and tries to build trust. Trustworthiness built through collaboration continues to validate Neos’s work (Wesner III). The results from collaborations include financial and artistic support for all partners. Ultimately, it seems
that collaboration is the key to making future productions viable and for building audiences. Collaboration allows Neos to produce large scale productions, serve larger audiences, and expect greater ticket revenue.

SCS’s successful transition in artistic leadership was part of an even bigger change in curriculum, which allowed SCS to stay relevant in the community it serves. The organization has implemented a branding strategy to build trust among its audiences. Prasser emphasizes that the keys to SCS’s branding involve the whole organization, mission, and impact on the community (III). These elements engage audiences, increase philanthropy, and ultimately serve the Akron community.

The case studies also suggest that consistency of implementation is important. Most strategies take time to create results, especially when they aim to change behavior or build trust. Meanwhile, the organization should be prepared and remain flexible to know when change is needed. The lessons of these two local arts organizations, Neos and SCS, will be a valuable resource for NWPL to use to adapt and create its own strategies.
CHAPTER V

DEVELOPMENT AND ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES FOR NWPL

NWPL Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats

Strengths

Balch Street Theatre

NWPL occupies a permanent space, Balch Street Theatre, in the Balch Street Community Center, where Balch Street Fitness Center and other county, city, and nonprofit offices are located. The City of Akron invited NWPL to be in residence there rent-free. In exchange, the NWPL staff maintains the space and stage equipment. Besides providing maintenance, NWPL creates value and adds diversity to the Balch Street Community Center. Having this physical space allows NWPL to collaborate with other theatre groups such as Ma’Sue Productions, the Center for Applied Drama and Autism (CADA), and host out of town groups like the Akropolis Performance Lab from Seattle. In summary, having the space strengthens NWPL’s relationship with the City of Akron, gives opportunities to collaborate with other theatre groups, and legitimizes NWPL as a permanent professional theatre in Akron.
Connection and reputation

NWPL has been working in Akron and Cleveland for almost 25 years. The company has connections with other groups both locally, nationally, and internationally. In the beginning, NWPL performed at the Cleveland Public Theatre because the space and audience were suitable and available there at that time. Ten years of performing in Cleveland earned the company a good reputation in Northeast Ohio. After that period, NWPL was in residence at The University of Akron, collaborating on productions with students and producing its own work. NWPL has always toured extensively, both nationally and internationally. Recently, the company toured *Death of a Man* to Canton and Chicago. Moreover, the company has conducted Performance Ecology Work Sessions around the world since 1994. These activities have built connections and enhanced NWPL’s reputation everywhere the company visits.

Slowiak also mentions that the collaboration with Ma’Sue Productions “has changed our way of thinking” because Ma’Sue has the ability to bring in a different demographic than NWPL (Slowiak I). This collaboration helps inform more people about the theatre space and NWPL. Besides strengthening a good relationship with an emerging young theatre group, NWPL has also welcomed the Center for Applied Drama and Autism (CADA) to use the space for classes and presentations. These two collaborations demonstrate that NWPL truly desires to serve the arts community in Akron.

Weaknesses

Lack of administrative staff
Currently, James Slowiak serves in several positions: president of the board of directors for CATAC, co-artistic director for NWPL, and administrator. Jairo Cuesta is another main administrator who is a co-artistic director and supervises the space. These are primarily unpaid positions. Slowiak states that the company needs a manager or administrative director to take charge of the development work (I). However, the company is not yet able to hire additional staff due to budget constraints.

Recognition of NWPL

The company has a good reputation among its core audience; however, NWPL has low name recognition in Akron. Slowiak often encounters people who never heard of NWPL. This could be due to the company’s unconventional schedule; the company does not announce its season in advance because it depends on the schedule of people in the ensemble and the creative process.

Opportunities

Matching audience value

Developing and discovering are special elements of theatre research and this creative approach is a key aspect of NWPL’s process. NWPL has two kinds of audiences: those who attend every open rehearsal and those who come to see the development of the work and yet never come back after seeing the first one. Slowiak explains that some people attend only once “not because they don’t like the work but because they think they already saw it so why go again.” NWPL’s idea is that “going to theatre is not the end of the experience” (Slowiak I). According to survey results on *Death of a Man*, respondents
are interested in theme and story and experiencing high-quality art rather than using theatre for socializing time with their friends and family. These survey results indicate that people also seek intellectual experiences and have high expectations from their attendance at NWPL events. It might be helpful for NWPL to introduce and educate people more about what NWPL is trying to do and how those activities match with the audience’s needs.

At the end of an interview for this study, Slowiak pointed out that many people expected the music industry to die when online music became popular. Instead, online music has helped the music industry by offering more variety than just mainstream music, including local bands and artists (II). Yaro Starak, an online business specialist and founder of Entrepreneurs-Journey.com, writes in a blog about the evolution of the music industry, that “it is the ultimate in social-networked, localized, niched, instant gratified and personally tailored music distribution” (Starak, “The Music Industry Evolution: How Localization, Social Networks, Niche Markets and the Long Tail Will Change Music Forever”). Niche music is an option for the customer who prefers alternatives to commercialized music. Slowiak envisions NWPL as a niche theatre, appealing to those who prefer an alternative experience, outside the mainstream. Introducing a new aspect of theatre to audience

The company is aware of current trends in audience engagement and is willing to explore new methods. Slowiak mentions that he is interested in an idea promoted by other members of the Network of Ensemble Theaters, pay what you can or pay when you come out (I). Slowiak would like to try this new idea in order to let the audience decide how much the performance is worth. This idea has the possibility to offer audiences a
sense of participation and being involved, and also could encourage young people who may have limited budgets to attend the performance to try a new experience.

Social media

NWPL recently started an Instagram account. One of Instagram’s major strands is its arts stream. Within six years of its launch, Instagram had 500 million accounts from people all over the world (Instagram, “Press News”). NWPL’s use of Instagram can help to present the company to new audiences, especially teenagers and those savvy in the arts.

Radio broadcasting

NWPL has utilized postcards, Facebook, and Mail Chimp as communication tools. However, only a small percentage of people in attendance learned of the production from online media. The majority indicated that they heard about NWPL from their friends or professors. The company is considering other channels of communication, such as radio. Slowiak says that the company needs to do something different to market its work, so he plans to advertise on The Summit Radio 91.3 and WKSU public radio stations. The expectations are that different audiences, especially young audiences, will be reached by this strategy (II).
Threats

Negative aspects about the Balch Street neighborhood

Balch Street Theatre is located in a socioeconomically mixed neighborhood, on the fringe of Akron’s West Hill neighborhood, Slowiak explained (I). The same building houses both a health club, offering a wide range of physical education activities, and the offices of several organizations. NWPL has had no security issues in the four years of its residency in the Balch Street Theatre. However, people recognize the neighborhood as a place where drug and prostitution issues are a concern.

NWPL’s Audience

Available audience data and information for NWPL is “anecdotal” (Slowiak II). NWPL has never done research about its audience because NWPL did not have its own space while sharing audiences with the Cleveland Public Theatre and The University of Akron. Now that NWPL is settled at Balch Street Theatre and receives more foundation and government support, the company recognizes that it needs to “put real attention to the audience development area” (Slowiak II). The audience survey that was conducted in connection with the performances of Death of a Man in February 2016 was the first serious survey of NWPL’s audience.

Target Group

The nature of NWPL’s work “appeals to younger audiences more than older; also maturity is important for appreciating the work” (Slowiak II). NWPL productions attract people who are interested in “going to theatre for stimulating life” (II). Regardless of the
level of education or background experience, people can understand and appreciate NWPL’s work. Slowiak also mentions that people who are new to theatre sometimes receive more from the performances than someone who has extensive theatre experience (Slowiak I). Therefore, NWPL is open to a variety of audiences. Meanwhile, life experience and maturity accelerate appreciation.

**Audience Values**

What the audience values about NWPL is also anecdotal. From Slowiak’s point of view, the work on stage and the ensemble are two things that people see as different in NWPL’s work (Slowiak II). The ensemble is deeply engaged in the producing process. The work is a result of training and many hours of rehearsal. Quality is a “visible intangible” and Slowiak believes that the audience recognizes it too (Slowiak I).

**Death of a Man Survey**

NWPL developed *Death of a Man* through several intensive work sessions and open rehearsals before its official premiere. In February 2016, two elements were added to both the artistic and production aspects. Jairo Cuesta, the solo performer in *Death of a Man*, and director James Slowiak visited the Colombian Amazon in January 2016 in order to meet members of the Uitoto tribe, the people represented by Cuesta in the performance. Cuesta and Slowiak received feedback and meaningful resources to continue development of the work. According to Walter Morales, a Uitoto tribe member, imagination is a fragment of reality. Walter suggested that Cuesta should make his imagination more authentic by connecting to the Amazon’s nature and adding more elements of the Uitoto’s traditional lifestyle into the work (“Searching for the Sources”).
After the research in the Amazon, the set was redesigned to provide a more authentic Amazon scene. During the talk back, audience members who had seen previous incarnations of the performance mentioned that they experienced new feelings from the piece (Cuesta, “Searching for the Sources”).

The production was also a part of a forum called *Rethinking Race: Black, White and Beyond*, organized by The University of Akron. The Rethinking Race forum aims to generate conversation about race and race-related issues and to create a better understanding of diversity and cultural issues (“Rethinking Race: Black, White and Beyond”). *Death of a Man* was the only performance presented during the forum in 2016. Many students attended this activity during Rethinking Race as a part of their class assignments. This collaboration brought many young audiences to experience NWPL’s production for the first time. Therefore, the audience survey information came primarily from new audience members. Though some core audience members attended as well, interesting information was gleaned from the new audience members’ perspective.

One of the most important aspects of audience development and engagement is understanding the audience. Preferences and expectations of audiences toward the arts are variable according to their ages and circumstances. Joanne Scheff Bernstein explains that arts marketers can segment the audiences by using “…age and life cycle status, gender, and ethnicity; personal, cultural, social, and psychological” characteristics. She states that “these characteristics affect the audience segments’ attitudes, behaviors, expectations, and preferences” (*Standing Room Only* 67). This principle is also known as demographic analysis.
Surveys were adapted from the NEA motivations and barriers guidelines and distributed at *Death of a Man: The Devil’s Milk, Part I*. The performance was held on February 4-7, 11-13, and 19-20, 2016 with approximately 30 audience members each night. Attendance reached around 50 for the last two performances. Audiences were separated into 8 groups by using their ages to analyze factors that affected attendance. The groups included under 15 years, 15-20, 21-30, 31-40, 41-50, 51-60, 61-70, and 71 and up. The total sample group was 133.

Half of the respondents were between the ages of 15 and 30 because the collaboration with The University of Akron brought in many college and high school students. The audiences generally had a high education level. According to the survey, the majority of the respondents were in college (39.8 percent) or had a degree between bachelor to Ph.D. (45.8 percent). Only 12.8 percent of those surveyed had a high school or less than high school degree (see figure 5.1).

Figure 5.2 shows that 52% of the respondents lived in Akron. It is also interesting that a greater percentage of people came from Cleveland (10%) than from other cities that are closer to Akron, such as Kent, Canton, Cuyahoga Falls, Medina, or Stow. Meanwhile, 23% came from other places (17 different places were mentioned).
Figure 5.1 Education Levels of Respondents.

Figure 5.2 Areas of Residency of Respondents.
The survey results emphasize that friends, family, or someone the respondents know had an influence on attendance in several ways. More respondents indicated that they heard about the performance from word of mouth than from sources such as Facebook, publications, or online newspapers. Friends’ recommendations were mentioned by 36.8 percent of the total audience. The largest group, 48.9 percent, selected Other as the source of information and most indicated a professor or teacher (see figure 5.3). This result corresponds to the experiences of Neos and SCS in marketing. Wesner learned from his audiences that people respond more to a person than to media (III). SCS indicated that for them, too, word of mouth is the most powerful marketing tool (Prasser II). From the survey, it would seem that a person, regardless of the type of relationship, has a greater impact on one’s decision-making than other sources. More than half of the respondents cited that a professor/teacher, friends, or spouse/partner influenced their decision to attend the performance. Another 18 percent mentioned some other factors, such as NWPL’s reputation, NWPL members, or personal interest, but they still mentioned a person’s name or indicated relationship status, as their reasons for attending (see figure 5.4).
Figure 5.3 Sources of NWPL’s Production Information.

Figure 5.4 Influences of the Audience’s Decision-Making.
The number one motivation among NWPL’s audience is different from the NEA research on U.S. adults. Figure 5.5 shows the percentage of respondents who mentioned each motivation corresponding to their attendance. The majority of respondents indicated theme/story was their motivation to attend that day’s performance. As is shown in the NEA report, socializing with friends and family is the most common motivation; however, socializing is not a major factor for NWPL audiences who attended this performance. Different performances might cause this change in motivation.

![Figure 5.5 Motivations for Attendance.](image)

According to the NEA report there were other minor motivations for each age group. For example, student attendees are more likely to be interested in a high-quality art experience according to their intention “to pursue higher education” (NEA Research Report #59 30). In figure 5.6, the 15-40 age group indicated work/education purpose and
high-quality art as their minor motivations. These motivations can be related not only to their level of education, but also to the need to fulfill a class assignment. Unlike the younger audiences, the older (aged 41 and above), mentioned supporting a community organization/event as one of their top three motivations. At the same time, high-quality art and learning a new form of art/knowledge were mentioned as motivations in every age group.

![Figure 5.6 Motivations of Three Age Groups.](image)

Lack of time due to work or children was the number one barrier to attendance (see figure 5.7), mirroring results from NEA research. Figure 5.8 illustrates that time conflict is an important barrier especially for ages 15-60, but is less important among people age 60 and above. A lack of information about the performance is the second most common barrier among respondents, especially those ages 15-60. Figure 5.8 also shows that lack of information was reported at a higher rate for respondents 61 and above. In
contrast to the NEA report, this group did not mention lack of a companion as the
greatest barrier. The 41-60 and above age group also has a strong perception of not being
interested in theme/story. However, the sample size of group 61 and up was small. The
result can provide implications, but might not statistically reflect a larger population.
Lack of a companion to attend with was reported by 30.8% of the respondents as a reason
for not attending. The result correlated to the figure of 72.9% of respondents who
attended the performance with someone, either friends or family members (see figure
5.9). Only 23.3% attended by themselves.

Figure 5.7 Barriers to Attendance.
Figure 5.8 Barriers for Three Age Groups.

Figure 5.9 Attended by Themselves or with Others.
Proposal of Engagement Strategies

There is no guarantee that audience engagement strategies used by Neos and SCS will work in the same way for other organizations. However, after careful study it’s highly likely that some strategies function more successfully with Akron audiences. An analysis of NWPL’s SWOT and a study of NWPL’s audiences’ behavior indicate that there are resources and potentials for NWPL to improve its strategies to engage more fully Akron audiences.

Collaboration

The survey results show that the collaboration with The University of Akron (Rethinking Race Forum) brings in new audiences to the venue; 75.2% of the audiences experienced NWPL’s performance for the first time and most of these audience members came from university classes. Neos demonstrates that collaboration is a vehicle to draw a larger audience. These efforts will not be successful in a short period. As Wesner said, a relationship with collaborators takes time to nurture and grow (III). Collaborative projects with other arts organizations will help NWPL become recognized by the core audiences of the other organizations. NWPL may need to find other compatible collaborators, create mutual benefits, and incorporate new ideas and workforce. Collaboration with different art forms that can be easily integrated with theatre, such as music or visual art, will appeal to broader audiences. With its connections, NWPL can invite a well-known person in the community to attract people’s attention as a guest artist from other organizations. The mutual benefits are a work created under the names of the two organizations and shared audiences.
Collaboration is a give-and-take relationship. Sometimes a monetary sacrifice is needed in exchange for a chance to connect with new audiences (Wesner III). In order to survive during the period of sacrificing and growing relationships with collaborators, NWPL might investigate a project and budget planning that are compatible with the partners and other organizations. NWPL’s nonprofit and charitable organization status allows partners to benefit from NWPL’s opportunity to obtain foundation grant support. NWPL may need to apply for more grants to subsidize losses that may occur.

**Program Development**

NWPL conducted a summer theatre workshop, Performance Ecology Work Session, in 2015. The workshop was successful, with 9 participants. The company has been conducting similar workshops in Italy and other places since 1994. In 2016, the workshop in Akron was cancelled because of low registration. Differences of the European market needs might explain why NWPL’s workshops have been successful in Italy for many years.

The Performance Ecology Work Session is an intensive creative training in the basic elements of the actor’s craft: physical exercises, voice training, attention and perception, and exploring and researching acting techniques. The work session requires a time commitment from the participants. According to the survey results, the difficulty of finding time to attend arts activities is the most common barrier for the majority of people. The intensive workshop might not appeal to many people since they cannot commit for a long period of time. The new bachelor’s degree in theatre arts promoted by Slowiak, serving as professor and coordinator of theatre at The University of Akron, could raise popularity and demand for the theatre workshop.
NWPL may try customizing the Performance Ecology Work Session according to the market’s needs. SCS shows an example of how the less intensive education program attracts more students to its classes. NWPL could offer the same elements of actor’s craft, but divide those into several individual workshops. This would provide a chance for participants to customize their needs and limitations of time and budget. They can register for some workshops for some skills as needed. The less intensive workshops will also be attractive for those who are interested in new forms of art or knowledge and prefer to try out a short-term class first. More people will become familiar with the space and neighborhood, reducing negative feelings about the venue.

Information and Communication

Information is important for the decision-making process. Respondents indicated that NWPL’s previous productions and the company’s reputation influenced their attendance. These results also imply that people who have had positive experiences with NWPL or hear positive reviews are more inclined to return for more events. At the same time, the majority of respondents indicated that they were motivated to attend by theme or story. However, a lack of information, including news, reviews, and production information, would prevent them from attending.

The Neos and SCS case studies do not identify whether the best communication tool is publications, media advertisements, or social media. However, both companies show that word of mouth seems to have the most powerful impact on attendance. According to the Death of a Man survey results, 85.7 percent of respondents indicated that they heard about the production from personal recommendations. NWPL might begin its information and communication strategy by engaging its core audiences who are
generally interested in NWPL’s work, understand its content, and can influence the target groups. The core audience is the company’s primary representative and can describe its experiences of NWPL’s productions on social media and invite friends to the performances. Encouraging audiences to talk about NWPL on a personal level will attract new audiences with their friends’ recommendations. Offering an incentive, such as a free workshop or chance to attend a rehearsal, might be an incentive for the core audience to represent the company to the community in a more targeted manner. Similar to the example of the parents’ involvement in the children’s program at SCS, this strategy increases the level of participation; audiences become a part of the company’s success. Posts on social media will help NWPL inform the public about the production information, theme and story, and quality of the work. One arts organization that already has begun a similar strategy is the Cleveland Orchestra. The orchestra created a program called Student Ambassador to reach more students. The student ambassadors help the orchestra promote the student membership program in universities around the region.

**Ensemble Branding**

SCS has shown that using a person as a connector creates impacts on attracting and engaging both current and new audiences, especially the young demographic. The casual conversation between the organization’s staff and audiences builds personal relationships, decreasing separation between the two entities. Adding young professionals to the chorus and presenting them to the public can create a new profile for the organization and attract the same demographic as audience.

There are opportunities for NWPL to make itself known by highlighting specific company members and emphasizing the value of the works. The company can present the
ensemble’s profile by introducing each member’s background and sharing their experience with NWPL. It could be a profile picture with a short description or a short documentary. By sharing several aspects of the ensemble, the audience will become familiar with the ensemble on a personal level and see the variety and talent of the group. The audience will have more connection to the actors when they have a conversation during the talk back sessions and workshops. The young professional ensemble members can increase a younger audience’s participation by providing examples of how the younger generation is involved with NWPL.

Another opportunity for introducing the abilities of the ensemble to the community is to provide a sample of a theatre workshop, conducted by the ensemble, after a matinee performance. This workshop for the community might teach fundamental knowledge of acting, such as concentration, use of the body, or acting exercises. Similar to the Neos student showcase, the theatre workshop is an example of work that encourages the audience to participate at a deeper level. The company may promote the workshop along with the production so that people will be prepared for it. This kind of program is a way to give back to the community. It’s likely the program will attract a younger generation who have a limited budget, but want to experience new knowledge. It may also attract adults who like to support community events. This kind of workshop uses a human connector strategy, connecting the ensemble to the audiences directly and increasing the interactions between the two groups. The relationship of NWPL with its audience could be reinforced over time since NWPL works with the same actors in several productions. NWPL can also try the “pay what you can” idea with this workshop.
Visibility

NWPL has a problem with name recognition since it is not yet well known among Akron audiences. Neos uses a variety of strategies to increase its visibility. The artistic directors or company members can represent NWPL more visibly at community events, conferences, or other non-arts related events. As a result, NWPL will be introduced to different groups of audiences. These are some of the ways NWPL can inform audiences about its work, the space, and the impact that NWPL produces in the community.
CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

Audience engagement activities are essential for every arts organization. Implementing new strategies is not an easy task, especially when a company has limited resources to conduct and monitor them. However, consistently employing these strategies will eventually create change. The arts community in Akron has become increasingly active. People see and interact with the arts in the community now more than previously. The *Inside Out* project of Akron Art Museum, the Art Bomb Brigade mural paintings, and the PorchRokr music festival in Highland Square have already added to the art scene in the community. This arts environment helps to facilitate NWPL’s attempts to engage Akron audiences.

Limitations

Reliability

The survey conducted for NWPL had a small number of respondents, especially among people 61 and over (only 14 samples). Consequently, the results might not reflect or represent the larger group of Akron theatre attendees. Results from existing research were examined to determine the extent to which they might validate results from the NWPL survey. Interviews with representatives of local arts organizations, the *Death of a
Man survey, and existing research suggest ways for NWPL to generate audience engagement strategies.

Data

Data can be used to evaluate strategies and see progressive differences in audience behavior. However, local arts organizations in this study have not conducted formal program evaluations or audience research. Currently, the effectiveness of engagement strategies can be inferred from factors such as number of attendees, earned revenues, and contributions. These numbers imply the effects of strategies by showing direct quantitative results and indirect benefits such as success in raising funds and visibility (McCarthy and Jinnett 49-51).

Research Questions

This study asked two main questions. The first question had to do with determining the most effective engagement strategies for local arts organizations in Akron. A related sub question involved examining how these strategies might inform NWPL’s audience engagement strategies. The second main question asked how existing case studies could inform audience engagement strategies for NWPL.

In order to answer the first question, interviews were conducted with representatives of three local arts organizations to explore the organizations’ histories, key values, and engagement activities. First, James Slowiak, co-artistic director of New World Performance Laboratory (NWPL), was interviewed in order to collect information about the company’s engagement strategies and to compare them to the other case
studies. Additional informants included Robert Wesner, artistic director of Neos Dance Theatre (Neos), and Karen Prasser, executive director of Summit Choral Society (SCS). The goal of these interviews was to identify and clarify strategies that these organizations have found effective and to discover how the organizations experience them. The interviews revealed that effective strategies for these local arts organizations included collaboration, programming, and engagement. Neos utilized collaboration as a key element of its programming. Collaboration allowed the young dance company, Neos, to grow its audiences and continue to produce more works in the Akron community. In Wesner’s experience, few organizations worked in isolation. Collaboration was especially common among nonprofits. Each organization aimed to help the other. During the interviews, it was discovered that both Neos and SCS collaborated with the Akron Symphony Orchestra as well as with each other. Neos and SCS designed their programs to reflect and to serve the needs of their audiences as much as possible. However, their programs never strayed from their core missions. SCS implemented engagement strategies in order to attract audiences on a deep level. The company created relationships with its audiences by establishing connections through scholarship programs and conversations at the concerts. In conclusion, it could be determined that strategies that were effective for local Akron organizations were related to emotional engagement and work with multiple partners. Several strategies utilized by these organizations created layers of engagement and addressed people in different age groups.

In order to better address the sub question of how other local arts organizations’ engagement strategies could inform NWPL’s engagement strategies, an understanding of NWPL’s engagement capacity and current strategies was undertaken. According to the
interviews with the three arts organizations, today local arts organizations implemented engagement strategies that involved audience participation and connected with other arts organizations. Common marketing strategies such as giving discounts, special ticket pricings, and public relations methods were still being used, but in conjunction with these other engagement activities.

According to NWPL’s resources and audience information, there was potential to implement new engagement strategies. Identifying which elements the company might use to engage the audience was important. Neos and SCS referred to their core values to engage audiences. Neos used the widest possible range of dance repertoire to attract large groups of people with different preferences. SCS believed that beautiful music impacted people’s lives and community. SCS used choral music and music education as tools to connect with its audiences. NWPL might refer more explicitly to its core values to engage audiences, just as Neos and SCS have done. NWPL had its ensemble and its unique pieces of works as its core values. The company could attract audiences with these two elements. The survey results indicated that the majority of respondents were interested in the theme and story, high quality arts, and new forms of arts or knowledge which were matched to NWPL’s core values. The proposed engagement strategies aimed to highlight those values and eliminate barriers for attending. There would be adjustments and unfamiliar situations during the transition, but the company might consider implementing these strategies more consistently in order to create change and bring about increased audience engagement.

The definition of development and engagement vocabularies from existing research was studied and compared to local arts organizations’ strategies in order to
obtain a better understanding of current trends and identify the level of engagement occurring currently in Akron. The comparison of the three types of strategies—audience development, audience engagement, and community engagement—suggested that creating an emotional bond was a powerful strategy for encouraging participation, and that the bond occurred most thoroughly through engagement strategies. In order to stay relevant to audiences, it might be helpful for NWPL to develop more specific engagement strategies.

Since there was no audience data record from the three arts organizations studied, existing audience research provided by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) was added. Motivations and barriers, as well as life stages, had strong influences on audience behavior and participation. The motivations and barriers provided a more in depth understanding of an audience’s perspective towards the arts than simple demographic information. By incorporating this knowledge into its organization, NWPL could estimate its abilities to engage and plan strategies to impact audiences. The available research was useful for NWPL in terms of providing audience information in general. However, the NEA research results were different from the NWPL survey conducted with Akron audiences. NWPL might find it useful to analyze both results in order to obtain the most accurate information.

Further Research

As mentioned earlier, local arts organizations rarely have time and resources to evaluate programs and analyze audience behavior, but audience research will definitely benefit the arts organizations. “The case studies suggest that rigorous research, even
though it may not yet be the norm in arts organizations, is crucial to understanding audiences and evaluating progress” (Harlow, Alfieri, Dalton and Field, “Cultivating the Next Generation of Art Lovers” ix-x). The research needs both quantitative and qualitative data for strategic planning and evaluation. Further research on audience behavior in arts participation should ask more detailed questions and include conversations with both audiences and non-audiences. This research will provide a deeper and broader view of audiences. Further research will then have more accurate results if more respondents can be found to provide their participation information and if more data records are available from the arts organizations. An in-depth understanding of the arts audience will provide valuable information for creating a “deeply engaging program” (ix).
Periodicals


Books


Websites


Interviews


Appendix A: Human Subject Approval

Registration Form

Please complete this form if you propose to conduct a project that involves interaction/intervention with or collection of information from individuals that meets one or more of the criteria below. IRB review is not required because:

☐ The project does not meet the Common Rule definition of research.
☐ The project does not collect information about the individuals with whom the researcher is interacting.
☐ Results will be shared only with the client or stakeholder(s) for private use for evaluation of an established program or for other non-research purposes.
☐ The project utilizes only data from secondary sources that are not individually identifiable.
☐ The project is an internal evaluation intended for quality control of ongoing program only.
☒ The project involves only oral history activities, such as open ended interviews, that ONLY document a specific event, or the experiences of individuals without intent to draw conclusions, generalize findings, or influence policy or practice.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Project Title:</th>
<th>A Proposal of Audience Development Strategies for New World Performance Laboratory</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PI Name:</td>
<td>Preammarin Miinidasuta</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PI Title</td>
<td>Arts Administration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PI Phone &amp; email:</td>
<td>330-966-3953, <a href="mailto:pm61@uakron.edu">pm61@uakron.edu</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Co-Investigators:</td>
<td>(list all co-investigators):</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty Advisor (if PI is a student):</td>
<td>Karen Stewart</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Provide below a brief description of the purpose of this study and the type and source of the information on individuals that you will use. (The space will expand as you type.)

This project will be a study on the audience development strategies of arts organizations in the Akron area. After analyzing all the information, I will propose audience development strategies that potentially will help New World Performance Laboratory (NWPL) maintain and deepen its relationship with the core audiences and build new audiences. There are three organizations, NWPL, Nect Dance Theatre and Summit Artspace, participating in my study. I will collect information by interviewing the executive directors, artistic directors, and staff members of those organizations. The interview will be open ended, focusing on audience development strategies. The individuals will provide information upon their experiences and/or data records.

Investigator’s Assurance

I certify that the information provided in this Registration Form is complete and accurate. I understand that as Principal Investigator, I have ultimate responsibility for the ethical conduct of this project.

Principal Investigator: Preammarin Miinidasuta

Date: 3/28/16

Faculty Advisor’s Assurance

I certify that the student is knowledgeable about the regulations and policies governing the research and has sufficient training and experience to conduct this particular study.

Faculty Advisor: [Signature]

Date: 3/28/14

Please submit this form to the IRB, c/o ORSSP, 284 Polsky, 44325-2102

The University of Akron Institutional Review Board

Approved 03/08.
Appendix B: Example of *Death of a Man* Survey

**Death of a Man: Devil’s Milk Part I**

This survey is a part of a thesis project about audience development. The survey aims to identify the audience and its needs that can lead to a better interaction with the theatre event. The final product of this project will be a set of strategies that engages people in the community with the arts.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>[ ] Male</th>
<th>[ ] Female</th>
<th>[ ] Both</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>[ ] under 15</td>
<td>[ ] 31 – 40</td>
<td>[ ] 61 – 70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[ ] 15 – 20</td>
<td>[ ] 41 – 50</td>
<td>[ ] 70 and up</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[ ] 21 – 30</td>
<td>[ ] 51 – 60</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>diploma</td>
<td>[ ] High school</td>
<td>[ ] Master</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[ ] Some college</td>
<td>[ ] PhD</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Where do you live (Akron, Cuyahoga Falls, Hudson, Kent, Cleveland, or other?) ________________________________________________

How many times did you attend NWPL’s productions in the last 12 months?
[ ] First time today [ ] I attended every production.
[ ] 2-3 times

Who are you coming with?
[ ] By myself [ ] My spouse/partner
[ ] Family/friend(s) [ ] Other___________

How did you hear about NWPL’s production?
[ ] Friends [ ] Facebook [ ] Online newspaper
[ ] Publication [ ] Other____________________

What influenced your decision to attend this performance?
[ ] My spouse/partner [ ] My friend(s)
[ ] My professor/teacher [ ] Review/critique
[ ] Information on our Facebook/website [ ] Other__________________________

86
Please rank the TOP 3 reasons that motivated your attendance today (1,2,3).
[ ] Socializing with friends and family
[ ] Interested in theme/story
[ ] Learning new form of arts/knowledge
[ ] Experiencing high-quality art
[ ] Supporting community organization/event
[ ] Low cost/free admission
[ ] Talk back session after performance
[ ] Seeing specific performer
[ ] Work or education purpose
[ ] Other_________________________________________________________________

Please rank the TOP 3 reasons that would prevent you from attending another NWPL performance (1,2,3).
[ ] Could not find anyone to go with
[ ] Costs too much
[ ] Could not find time, due to work or children
[ ] Too difficult to get here
[ ] Lack of information about the performance
[ ] Not interested in theme/story
[ ] Did not want to go to this location
[ ] Other_________________________________________________________________

Your email: __________________________________________

*** Thank you so much for your time and participation :) ***