

Deepening Audience Relationships



Whāngai
kia tupu,
kia puawai
That which
is nurtured
grows

We know from audience segmentation research in the Waikato and Aotearoa (see Toolkit 04), that while we want social connection “at the heart of our arts experience”, 60% of our audiences are “seeking intellectual, emotional or spiritual return on their time and money”.

And we know from the Wellbeing and Arts, Culture and Creativity in the Waikato report that mental health wellness is a priority in the Waikato, and that creative self-expression has “better mental wellness outcomes”.¹

¹ https://creativewaikato.co.nz/site/uploads/HS_Creative-Waikato_Wellbeing-and-Arts-Culture-and-Creativity-in-the-Waikato_FINAL.pdf

Meaningful connection

It tells us that those who “attend or create artistic, cultural or creative events” feel “more connected to culture and community, to land and place, and self”. And that the more we attend or participate in creative or cultural events, the higher our wellbeing is likely to be.

The majority of us want deeper nourishment from our art and culture experiences.

We want meaningful experiences, and these are good for our wellbeing.

But for those of us putting on exhibitions, shows, workshops and creative events in our communities, how can we attempt to deepen the experiences and ensure they are more meaningful for our audiences, outside of the content we work hard to deliver?

The majority of us want deeper nourishment from our art and culture experiences

Sparking deeper meaning through content

What if you looked at the content in your exhibition, event or show, and looked for opportunities to expand or spark deeper knowledge and experience based on the themes?

Waikato theatre practitioner Gaye Poole has a great example of this.

Her theatre company Carving in Ice tends to produce works that deal with challenging themes – as she puts it, “we do not offer light entertainment or musicals”. In the past, when dealing with a heavy theme such as domestic violence, she has held forums with psychologists facilitating and leading discussions with the audience, allowing them the opportunity to dive deeper and explore this sensitive subject with professional guidance.

The Waikato Museum exhibition *Toi is Rongoaa* (2022) held various talks and workshops to mark Matariki, including live painting to the vibration of sound led by Regan Balzer and Horomono Horo, pompom making with contemporary crochet artists Lissy and Rudi Robinson-Cole, and an introduction to traditional rongoaa (Maaori medicine) with David Kukutai Jones.

Getting people to locate the door and walk through it is not enough — once they get to the other side the experience needs to be meaningful, otherwise they won't return.

Nina Simon

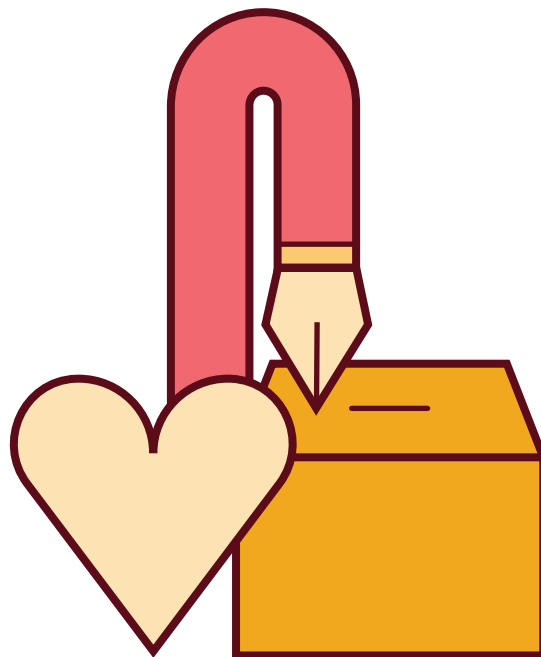
Active participation

Museum director Nina Simon advocates for active participation and collaboration with audiences as a crucial way to deepen connection.

She encourages museum visitors to be co-creators, to see themselves as part of a bigger shared story, as active participants in the museum experience.

This starts as soon as people are through the door – they are invited to leave suggestions on how the museum can be improved, write poems about objects in the galleries, bottle up a memory and put it on display for others to see, and play games that invite them to engage with artefacts. There are craft activities, spaces to talk, activities to connect with others who are not like them and spark connections.

“These acts are beautiful, powerful, and meaningful to others who walk in the door” says Nina, because in general “people engage in culture to meet their deep seated, social, intellectual, emotional and spiritual needs – and...we need to deliberately design everything we do to meet those needs...[this] sets Audience-focused organisations apart from the rest.”². This is an example that can be applied in multiple spaces and venues, not just in a museum context.



Stretching your audience

Do you have an idea of the direction in which you'd like to take your mahi, but worry you might frighten off your current audience? Stretching your core audience is the strategy of moving towards your direction slowly, gently exposing your current audience to ideas and experiences, so that together you edge closer to where you'd like to be.

For example, you may want to showcase locally made films in your theatre, but worry your current audience won't come if you were to suddenly do this. Therefore, you could consider showing a local short film before your standard main film offering, and slowly build your audience's appreciation and appetite.

Collaborations with others are excellent for stretching your audience!

Toitoti in Hastings had an innovative approach to the idea of 'stretching' the sense of belonging and familiarity to the Opera House by the local community. Built in 1915, The Opera House is resplendent in its ornateness and history, and was perhaps intimidating and disconnected to some in the surrounding lower socioeconomic community.

So, in an effort to break down barriers, manager Megan Peacock-Coyle invited local school children into the theatre and said "Go! Run around, touch things! Have fun in this space". She says it took 20 minutes or so before the children warmed up and truly responded to her invitation, forgetting their shyness and skipping through the theatre, laughing and rolling delightedly over the carpets. Megan knows that these tamariki are the audiences and practitioners of the future, that through these children their whānau may be encouraged along, and that they will forever view the Opera House as a place of joy – and not as a place that belongs to others.

Our community spaces have huge potential

Do you agree that the galleries, theatres, museums and similar spaces in our communities are vital “for connection and even conversation between humans who would not otherwise interact”?

Diane Ragsdale believes that “cultural institutions are one of the few places in society that have the potential to bring people together across divides on equal terms.”

She suggests that when we bring people together for a show, an event or exhibition, we have a wonderful opportunity to also allow them to “connect in some meaningful way across those divides.”

For two hours during Hamilton Book Month’s Poetry Walk in 2022, a diverse crowd of strangers walked through the central city as a large connected group, thrown together for either the curiosity or love of poetry. The large crowd created a buzz in the twilight city, bringing traffic to a stand when crossing the street, chatting together as they were led towards unknown

destinations, and as they wrapped each emerging poet in a respectful circle, allowing them a supportive space to perform. At the last destination, which had couches set up and zines for sale, people mingled and chatted, congratulating the poets who, it turns out, had been part of the crowd all along.

These types of experiences certainly drive deeper, and offer up platforms for richer connections.

³ <https://www.artsjournal.com/jumper/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/The-Changing-Face-of-the-Arts-Remarks-at-the-Stratford-Festival-Forum-August-2019-1.pdf>

Tips to deepen audience experiences

Think about the social needs of our audiences, because predominately this is what our audiences most seek—social connection.

Can you offer spaces for people to gather before, after, or during your event?

Can you hold special events that allow for people in your community to get to know each other more?

Can you collaborate with hospitality providers to offer meals or drinks at a close by venue before or after, or offer catered snacks or meals to encourage a more complete social experience?

Think about the holistic experience of your audience— from parking, to social opportunities, the state of your bathrooms, the warmth of your theatre, the ability to participate

Are people comfortable? Are people safe? Are people happy and connected?

Think about the content in your offering and look for ways to invite your audiences and visitors to connect more deeply, or ways to enhance their knowledge or understanding

See Toolkit 02 to pick up tips and tricks for starting a ‘conversation’ with your audience, as this itself is a way to deepen engagement – because if your audience feels that they are seen and heard, that they are valued and that they matter, then their engagement and loyalty to you and your cause will most certainly deepen



Useful questions



Can you see how opportunities for deeper connection might be possible with the mahi (work) you do? Can you see how this might work in your community?

How could what you offer spark meaningful and fulfilling opportunities for your audiences?

How can you encourage active participation through your mahi and programming?

How could you introduce 'stretch' into your current activity?

Are there other local artists or organisations you could collaborate with? (See Toolkit 06 for guidelines on healthy and effective collaborations)

Useful links and reading


The Changing Face of Arts Engagement; A talk by Diane Ragsdale at the Stratford Festival Forum (August 16, 2019)

 artsjournal.com/jumper/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/The-Changing-Face-of-the-Arts-Remarks-at-the-Stratford-Festival-Forum-August-2019-1.pdf

Waikato Arts Navigator

 creativewaikato.co.nz/site/uploads/Waikato-Arts-Navigator_Regional-Strategy_ONLINE.pdf

Wellbeing and Arts, Culture and Creativity in the Waikato (2022)

 creativewaikato.co.nz/site/uploads/HS_Creative-Waikato_Wellbeing-and-Arts-Culture-and-Creativity-in-the-Waikato_FINAL.pdf

The Art of Relevance, Nina Simon TedX Talk

 youtube.com/watch?v=NTih-l739w4

The Tao of Audience Development for the Arts; Philosophies About Audience Development Five Years in the Making by Shoshana Danoff Fanizza
