

Deepening audience relationships

Key points

Research tells us that the majority of us in the Waikato want deeper nourishment from our art and culture experiences — we want meaningful experiences that are good for our wellbeing

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

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

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

In an effort to break down barriers, Toitū manager (Hastings) Megan Peacock-Coyle invited local school children into the theatre and said “Go! Run around, touch things! Have fun in this space”. 20 minutes later, the kids warmed to the idea, and forgetting their shyness, they skipped 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 to come 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 and events have HUGE potential ‘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”

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

Useful questions

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?

In what ways could you spark meaningful and fulfilling opportunities for your audiences?

In what ways could you encourage active participation through your mahi and programming?

In what ways could you 'stretch' your audiences?

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

Can you 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?

Whāngai kia
tupu, kia puawai
That which is
nurtured grows