

ARTS AND OLDER AMERICANS

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Everyone should have the opportunity for lifelong learning through the arts, from childhood through old age. Greater access and participation in the arts enhances the quality of life of all citizens. The energy, wisdom and creative potential that older Americans bring to the arts are an important part of our cultural heritage. According to the National Endowment for the Arts 2008 [Survey of Public Participation in the Arts](#) participants are older than before. In particular, performing arts audiences are increasingly older than the average U.S. adult. However, from 2002 to 2008, 45–54-year-olds—historically a large component of arts audiences—showed the steepest declines in attendance for most arts events.

Arts programming and design has a direct effect on the ability of older Americans to participate in the arts with dignity and independence. Arts organizations should take a proactive approach to designing and implementing programs that support older Americans as artists, patrons, mentors, teachers, volunteers and consumers of the arts.

Developing Older Audiences: Guidelines for Performing Arts Groups

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The National Council on the Aging Inc.

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Foreword

The National Council on the Aging, Inc. (NCOA) has worked since 1950 to bring about the creation of services and programs that make the lives of older persons more meaningful and personally gratifying. In 1973, the National Center on Arts and the Aging was established as a program of NCOA to serve as advocate and catalyst for linking the arts and the aging. The center mission is to ensure that older persons have an equal opportunity with other age groups to participate in and have access to the arts and that older visual and performing artists can find continuing opportunities to work in the profession.

Supported in part by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, the center acts as a clearinghouse for program ideas and information. It serves the field through publications, sponsorship of workshops, seminars, and conferences; it also provides technical assistance and consultation to individuals and organizations interested in developing a closer relationship between older persons and the arts. *Developing Older Audiences: Guidelines for Performing Arts Groups* is part of the center's continuing effort to disseminate new and timely information to artists and arts organizations.

In recent years, theatres and performing arts centers have developed an awareness of the benefits to be realized from older audiences. Many facilities have reduced ticket prices for older citizens and arrange for special equipment to accommodate persons with visual and hearing impairments. But these actions alone have not been totally successful in attracting new audiences.

Developing Older Audiences: Guidelines for Performing Arts Groups surveys the field in an effort to discover barriers that deter older people from theatre attendance; ways to overcome the obstructions are suggested, and a clear message emerges: time and energy channeled into eliminating barriers will pay substantial dividends and allow performing arts groups to offer the community a greatly needed service.

"What elderly artists have to tell us is that we, too, in the last stage of life, can continue to explore both ourselves and the world around us. The wisdom accumulated over the years can be shaped into the crown of our own experience, for, in the creative act itself, we draw from the wellsprings of life."

From *The Crown of Life: Artistic Creativity in Old Age*, by Hugo Munsterberg
Older Americans bring to the performing arts a lifetime rich in human experience. In six or more decades of living, they witness world-shaking events and ride personal roller coasters of joy, sadness, suffering, good fortune, and adversity, the very essence of theatre and art. But less than half of the older population is involved in the arts today. A 1984 Harris poll shows that attendance rates for this group fell more than ten percent below the average of the total population and declined even more in other categories. In this pamphlet, we will discuss the whys and hows of targeting an older audience to benefit your arts organization, the older generation, and others in the community.

Who Are the Older People?

Studies show that older adults are no more homogeneous than any other age group, so any generalization about older people is dangerous. It is possible, however, to look at various segments of the older population--i.e., young-old, old-old, vigorous, frail, independent, needing partial or full outside care, well-educated, grade and high school dropouts--and from that scrutiny to determine marketing strategies for each. Keep in mind: **all segments of the older population are a potential audience.** We will concentrate, though, on the development of the "older adult" audience (too many pages would be needed to enumerate separate marketing strategies for each segment), and we urge you to formulate your plans with a keen awareness of the diversity of the older population.

Why Develop an Older Audience?

America is getting older! Did you know that:

- In the last two decades, the number of citizens 65 and more years of age increased twice as fast as the rest of the population?

- By the year 2020, approximately one if every six Americans will be 65 years or older?

The accelerating numbers alone make older adults an obvious marketing target. Surveys taken over the last decade, however, reveal a number of additional facts about the older age group that provide further marketing incentives.

- People are retiring earlier.
- People 65 and over report 25.4 hours a week of leisure time compared with the Baby Boom generation of 16 hours, according to pollster Louis Harris.
- Increased life expectancy can leave a period of 20 to 25 active years of retirement.
- Older Americans are enjoying good health. A report by the U.S. Senate Special Committee on Aging states that eight out of ten older persons describe their health as good or excellent.
- The gap between the number of school years completed by the elderly and the rest of the adult population has narrowed significantly.

Unfortunately, the income levels of many older persons are still below those of other age groups. But some statistics show that, despite less income, older adults in many cases have wider purchasing options. Their households are smaller, their home mortgages have been paid off, and they are no longer burdened with the expense of educating children. Furthermore, the spending patterns of older citizens--even the relatively well off--tend frequently to be conservative.

In late life, many older persons find the years a time of exploration, a flowering of previously undiscovered creative talent and a period of great aesthetic appreciation. "If it weren't for my drama class, I would be dead" is not an isolated comment. **But the audience and volunteer potential in the older age groups is barely tapped.** Why? What can you do?

Here are descriptions of major barriers that exclude many older people from theatrical and musical performances, coupled with suggested ways to remove these obstacles. You may feel some of the suggestions should be acted on by others. But if limited resources are directed elsewhere, as one arts manager put it, "We often have to be the source of action. If we want to fill our seats, we have to do something about it."

Barrier 1: STEREOTYPING

Myths and stereotypes that block marketing to an older audience are: Most older adults are confined to nursing homes, live in the past, possess closed minds, show declining

intelligence, and need performances geared to their bland tastes. Remember, the older population is as varied as any other age group! The truth is that only five percent of those over 65 live in nursing homes, and even they can be potential audiences. Research indicates that one's ability to learn continues into advanced age, and that judgment may be enhanced with age. Other studies show that rigidity and resistance to change are definitely not inherent in developmental processes. So, **it is not necessary to create special programs for older audiences, and it is often a mistake.**

The attention and energies of arts administrators are best focused on scheduling, transportation, eliminating physical barriers, and providing educational support.

Barrier 2: TRANSPORTATION

Though some people continue to drive their automobiles into their eighties and nineties, others decide late in life, for personal or health reasons, to give up their cars. Then, for the first time, they are faced with the frustrations of public transportation. They have not formed the habit of using buses and trains and often find the schedules confusing, the walk to public facilities long, the waits on street corners tiring, bus drivers impatient, and subways frightening--all major deterrents to taking trips to theatrical events.

What can performing arts groups do to ease transportation problems?

- Contact senior centers, recreation and park departments, area agencies on aging, and bus and taxi companies to determine what networks of special transportation exist for older adults.
- Contact schools, churches, factories, and other institutions owning buses to determine if arrangements might be made to use them during off hours.
- Establish a meeting place--library, senior, or community center, apartment complex--and escort new groups aboard public transportation to your performances, familiarizing them with the best routes.
- Seek funds from local corporations or businesses to cover transportation expenses of older audiences to your performances.
- Provide price or membership incentives for those with cars to drive less mobile members of their families or others in the community to your facility.
- Determine the feasibility of a carpool or volunteer driver system.

Barrier 3: SCHEDULING

Though many older adults feel comfortable going out at night, many others, particularly the old-old, do not. The fear of being an easy victim for purse snatchers and muggers is often compounded for many who see poorly in the dark. Numerous performing groups

are discovering that matinees pay substantial dividends. Reduced transportation rates and services, such as the loan of buses, are often available only during daytime or non-rush hours. If matinees cannot be performed by your group, try moving some performances to the early evening hours.

Barrier 4: PHYSICAL ACCESS

The accessibility of public buildings to the handicapped population has received much attention in the past decade. Organizations have been started and many books and pamphlets written to assist institutions in adapting their facilities for the sight, hearing, and mobility impaired (see bibliography). Well-endowed theatres are installing audio systems for the hearing impaired, adding elevators, and redesigning spaces to accommodate wheelchairs. For the majority of older adults, such measures are not essential. However, most people will experience some changes in sensitivity to sensory stimulation as they age, so, when reaching the late seventies or early eighties, they discover that vision, hearing, taste, and smell are not what they used to be. *The Sixth Sense: Understanding Sensory Changes and Aging* (a film of The National Council on the Aging produced in 1985) contains facts that might be helpful to performing arts planners and managers.:

- Older people prefer bright light but dislike the glare of shiny floors and furniture. Older eyes generally find it difficult to adjust to abrupt changes in light and seeing colors at the blue-green end of the spectrum.
- Hearing loss is frequently experienced by older people. Good lighting allows people with hearing problems to watch lip movements and facial expressions more easily.

What can be done that requires little or no expense?

- Train ushers in the needs of the frail and handicapped. Learn the proper way to escort a blind or frail person and how to move wheelchairs up and down steps and around barriers.
- Assign volunteers to greet older patrons and to inform them about public area such as lobbies, restrooms, and telephones.
- Be sure that lighting is adequate, particularly around stairs and obstructions.
- Use colored strips to mark the edges of steps and curbs.
- Be sure small rugs contrast sharply in color with floors.
- Print programs in an off-white, beige, or another non-glare color.
- Use large, well-spaced lettering and be sure that letters are in sharp contrast to

background.

- Schedule some programming in small, inviting spaces.

Barrier 5: TICKET PRICES

Many older adults on fixed incomes, with medical expenses, are finding it difficult to stretch their retirement funds to meet today's costs. Nevertheless, these older persons could be new audiences, and, with some reduction in ticket prices, older citizens could become loyal supporters as well as volunteers for your community arts organizations. With some encouragement, they may bring in full-paying audience members from their families, friends, and acquaintances. Successful pricing strategies used across the country include:

- special reduced rates for older adults, particularly for matinees
- special rates for grandparents attending with grandchildren
- free seats for older adults underwritten by state and local arts councils
- special subscription package for older adults
- special group rates for senior centers, senior church groups, and senior citizen clubs, adult day care centers, and retirement homes.
- free tickets to organizations serving older adults

Those with free tickets fill empty seats, and often the organizations are inspired to purchase blocks of tickets for future performances. Some of the most popular performances, not always the least, should be offered.

Barrier 6: EDUCATION

All age groups, including the older generation, are becoming increasingly well-educated. But many persons today in their seventies, eighties, or older did not complete secondary school and were not exposed to the performing arts during their working years. A seeming indifference to the arts often masks the older person's self-perceived inability to understand what is happening on stage. Arts groups successful in attracting older audiences are often the most innovative in creating ways to surmount the education barrier. Their methods have included:

- outreach performance, demonstration, and educational programs in senior centers, nursing homes, senior residences, and other places where older people congregate
- inviting older adults to attend a rehearsal

- inviting groups of older adults to behind-the-scenes tours, often meeting with directors, choreographers, and performers, and learning about make-up, costuming, scene building, etc.
- offering theatre or musical workshops targeted to the older population--either outreach or at the theatre

Barrier 7: SOCIAL

Older people can be more lonely than other age groups, particularly if spouses are dead and family members are in other parts of the country, busy with their own pursuits. As a result, many are attracted to activities offering interaction. Some art groups have discovered that a little effort to help involve older adults may result in substantial dividends. Examples include:

- Working with established senior organizations to enable older people to attend events as a group.
- Encouraging the older population to join fund-raising efforts and booster clubs.
- Inviting older persons to serve on boards of directors.
- Seeking older volunteers.
- Offering membership cards with special social events.
- Building a strong ongoing relationship with older patrons (actually all patrons) by warm, courteous service in ticket transactions and inquiries, in person and by telephone and letter.

Steps to Developing a Marketing Strategy

No performing arts organization has the funds, manpower, or energy to pursue all of the foregoing suggestions. Your marketing plan will depend on your local situation--the older population segment you are seeking to attract, the barriers keeping your potential older audience away and how you overcome such barriers. Three important steps in developing a market strategy are:

1. INVESTIGATE THE COMMUNITY

Find out how many older persons are in your community and what networks exist to reach them. (The local area agency on aging should be of help to you.) Do transportation programs for older people exist? Are there senior centers, day care centers, golden age clubs, church groups or other groups of older adults with which to work? Will the area agency on aging help older adults to attend performances? Does

the local arts council give grants to assist programs for older persons? Is there potential for intergenerational approach, booster clubs, volunteer corps, or outreach programs?

2. GET OUT THE WORD

Your older audience will not increase if people are not informed of your efforts. An important step in successful marketing is determining the best ways to reach your targeted group. Most communities have one or more newspapers, advertising weeklies, magazines or newsletters directed toward or read exclusively by the older population that would welcome both ads and news stories about performing arts events. Do not overlook the journals directed toward a particular ethnic group. Many older persons who grew up in other countries attended operas, plays and musical events regularly. A **newsletter** may be popular with the audiences curious about what it takes to make a performance and what goes on behind the scenes.

The printed word is an important marketing tool, but so is personal contact; in fact, interaction with service providers and with older people themselves is essential. Senior center directors are much more likely to make the effort to schedule an outing to your theatre or hall if he/she knows members of your group and senses your sincere desire to inform and to entertain their members. **You need the support of the aging network to be successful!**

After determining the methods--special subscription, reduced price, scheduling and educational events--that you will employ to build your older audience, a **direct mail campaign** can be an effective tool. First, develop a specific mailing list. Make sure the material you send is clear, simple, and relays your message quickly and interestingly (true for any age group). Applications for membership or ticket order forms should also be uncomplicated; direct mail is not the place to give detailed information. Remember, the job of direct mail is to attract people to your theatre for one performance or a season. The quality of the performance will determine whether you make lasting friends.

3. SURVEY THE RESULTS

A questionnaire may be used for many purposes. How did the audience like the play? Which segment of the older adult population did you attract? Are there still barriers to increased attendance that you can do something about? How did the audience members learn about the performance? What was the chief mode of transportation used to get to the theatre? Was transportation adequate? Some theatre groups like to ask questions that need no answer but might evoke insight: "What in the dramatization has a particular meaning for you in the context of today's world?"

Keeping in touch with the senior centers and others that send groups to the theatre is also an excellent way to survey the results of efforts to build an older audience. Once again, the personal contact is important. Have volunteers and members of your organization talk with older members of the audience during intermission and after the

performance. The conversations create a friendly atmosphere and may reveal how well your plans are succeeding.

Arts and Older Americans Resource Directory

[Arts for the Aging, Inc. \(AFTA\)](#)

Bethesda, MD

Phone: (301) 718-4990

Email: info@AFTAarts.org

Description: Arts for the Aging (AFTA) is a pioneering organization that provides outreach programs specifically designed to engage older adults in health improvement and life enhancement through the arts. Research shows that regular participation in programs like AFTA's help to minimize age-related physical and cognitive impairments, and contributes to better physical, intellectual and emotional health.

[Community Access to the Arts, Inc. \(CATA\)](#)

Great Barrington, MA

Phone: (413) 528-5485

Email: info@communityaccesstothearts.org

Description: Community Access to the Arts, Inc. (CATA) nurtures and celebrates the creativity of people with disabilities through shared experiences in the visual and performing arts. Their programs take place in the healthcare, eldercare, educational, and the community. They serve 600 individuals with developmental, physical, emotional, and/or mental disabilities representing 26 different human service and educational organizations, as well as individuals living at home.

[GRACE \(Grass Roots Art and Community Efforts\)](#)

Hardwick, VT

Phone: (802) 472-6857

Email: graceart@vtlink.net

Description: GRACE has been dedicated to the development and promotion of visual art produced primarily by older, self-taught artists of rural Vermont. GRACE recruits professional artists to hold instructional training and workshops at nursing homes, senior-meal sites, mental health centers, and hospitals.

[Institute on Aging Center for Elders and Youth in the Arts \(CEYA\)](#)

San Francisco, CA

Phone: (415) 750-4111

Email: info@ioaging.org

Description: Institute on Aging for Elders and Youth in the Arts (CEYA) provides specialized visual and performing arts programming tailored to the Bay Area older adult population. Professional artists and local youth work with seniors to increase artistic skills and self-expression. Their events and exhibitions have brought the resulting work to the greater community, reaching over 4000 viewers per year.

[Liz Lerman Dance Exchange \(LLDE\)](#)

Takoma Park, MD

Phone: (301) 270-6700

Email: janeh@danceexchange.org

Description: Liz Lerman Dance Exchange (LLDE) brings the power of dance and story to a broad spectrum of individuals. The company is composed of ten dancers whose ages span six decades. These dancers perform, rehearse, teach, plan residencies, choreograph, assist in fundraising and administrative activities, act as spokespeople for the organization, and serve on the board of directors. LLDE's current programs for older adults include dance classes at senior centers and nursing homes, community performance events, studio dance incentives for older adults, and training for dancers, healthcare professionals, teachers, gerontology students, and others in the art of making dance in community settings.

National Arts and Disability Center (NADC)

Los Angeles, CA

Phone: (310) 825-5054

Email: bstoffmacher@mednet.ucla.edu

Description: The mission of the National Arts and Disability Center (NADC) is to promote the inclusion of audiences and artists with disabilities in all facets of the arts community. The NADC is a university based organization that has two major focuses: careers in the arts for people with disabilities and making the arts accessible to people with disabilities. The NADC provides technical assistance in the area of seniors and the arts.

National Center for Creative Aging (NCCA)

Washington, DC

Phone: (202) 895-9456

Email: info@creativeaging.org

Description: National Center for Creative Aging (NCCA) is dedicated to fostering an understanding of the vital relationship between creative expression and the quality of life of older people. Creative expression is important for older people of all cultural and ethnic backgrounds, regardless of economic status, age, or level of physical emotional or cognitive functioning. The arts can serve as a powerful way to engage elders in a creative and healing process of self-expression, enabling them to create works that honor their life experience.

National Endowment for the Arts

Washington, DC

Phone: (202) 682-5532

Description: The National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) works with grantees and other Federal and state agencies to make the arts fully accessible to people with disabilities, older adults, veterans and people living in institutions. The NEA provides grants to: accessible arts projects, promote arts education, supports cultural activities. The NEA partners with local, state, regional and federal arts organizations to make arts programs more available to all people with and without disabilities. The NEA did a study in 2006 entitled, "[The Creativity and Aging Study: The Impact of Professionally Conducted](#)

Cultural Programs on Older Adults.”

National Joint (SAG/AFTRA) Senior Performers Committee

Screen Actors Guild

Los Angeles, CA

Phone: (323) 549-6646

Email: diversity@sag.org

Description: This is a joint committee between SAG and AFTRA comprised of senior performers. Its primary aim is to increase equitable employment opportunities and work conditions for senior performers by promoting more open attitudes within the industry with respect to casting and the way in which seniors are portrayed in film, television and commercials. This committee also addresses problems of retired performers or those who may be approaching retirement (over the age of 55) through focusing on the areas of screen image, pensions, social security and unemployment insurance.

OASIS

St. Louis, MO

Phone: (314) 862-2933

Email: mkerz@oasisnet.org

Description: OASIS is a national education organization dedicated to enriching the lives of adults age 50 and older through lifelong learning and service. The mission of OASIS's programs is "to enhance the quality of life for older adults through challenging programs in the arts, humanities, wellness and volunteer service." The Center works closely with other cultural organizations and institution to make our members aware of and able to take advantage of their services.

University of Nevada, Las Vegas Department of Theatre - Senior Adult Theatre Program (UNLV)

Las Vegas, NV

Phone: (702) 895-4673

Email: doug.hill@unlv.edu

Description: The UNLV Senior Adult Theatre program offers specialized courses, practical experience, and a Bachelor of Arts degree for theater majors, and older adults. Students of varying levels of ability, experience, and education are admitted and required to participate in all aspects of theater. Senior Adult Theatre classes may be taken to fulfill a degree program, to obtain college credit, or for self-enrichment.

Stagebridge Senior Theater Company

Oakland, CA

Phone: (510) 444-4755

Email: info@stagebridge.org

Description: Stagebridge Senior Theater Company is the nation's oldest Senior Theatre Company. Stagebridge is an arts organization that uses theatre and storytelling to bridge the generation gap by breaking down stereotypes and stimulating more positive attitudes toward aging. Stagebridge's intergenerational programs feature senior

theater productions, storytelling in the schools, nurses training programs, acting classes for seniors, and writing contests for children.

See also:

The [National Arts and Disability Center](#) for resources and information related to the Arts and Older Americans.