

# Determining Programming and Events



*This building block requires research and a sustained commitment to building relationships. For example, an organization that seeks to better serve a particular community might consider organizing informal gatherings to ask what the greater cultural interests and needs are, as well as what roadblocks exist.*

Consider the relevance and appeal of your current programming and events to the communities you want to engage. Many organizations already have resources for connecting with specific communities, such as staff members with professional and personal connections, volunteers who are community leaders or board members who are active in other civic organizations. Having a diverse staff and board definitely helps in connecting with communities, and examining your current hiring and board recruitment practices can help in making changes on this front. While an individual cannot represent an entire community, she or he may have connections and insight that bring a new perspective and voice to the table.

This building block heavily relies on relationships that are cultivated and nurtured genuinely and consistently. Continuity is key. Reaching out once or putting on a singular event or program will not create a long-lasting relationship between the organization and a particular community. Again, engagement is a two-way street and communities cannot be expected to participate in your activities if you do not participate in theirs.

## Putting It Into Action

Let your mission and vision guide you in this work, but see if you can broaden your reach. Some suggestions for building deeper relationships with communities and creating programs and events that resonate with a wider range of community members include:

- Participating in the activities and celebrations of cultural groups, instead of only inviting the community to come to the organization's programs and events.
- Making events and programs welcoming by offering pre-show introductions, behind-the-scenes tours, or translation services.
- Integrating elements and traditions of a particular culture into programs and events (with feedback from community members before doing so).
- Including artists from various cultures and demographic categories.



For more information:  
[racc.org/buildingblocks](http://racc.org/buildingblocks)

## Questions to Consider

- Is there a need to create new programs or expand on current offerings to engage communities? Are more audience segment research and relationship building needed to effectively develop or enhance these programs?
- What existing relationships or skill sets can help get us started?
- Would collaboration with other arts organizations also wanting to reach the same audience segment be valuable and feasible?
- What challenges to participation exist for your identified audience segments? How will the organization reduce or remove these challenges?
- How can we engage new volunteers from different communities and engage ambassadors that way?
- How can the arts space or venue be made welcoming to all members of the community and not just one segment of it?



## Resources and Tools

- The City of Portland's [Community Engagement Liaisons \(CELS\) Program](#) utilizes community engagement specialists who are fluent in the language and culture of newcomers to Portland as a means to connect with cultural communities and to build and strengthen these relationships.
- [Invitation to the Party: Building Bridges to the Arts, Culture, and Community](#), by Donna Walker-Kuhne, describes in-depth strategies and methods to engage diverse communities in arts and culture, reflecting the content of many of the building blocks in this framework. Included are tools for building audiences, case studies, and descriptions of her successes at building diverse audiences. "We are not building audiences simply to increase earned income. Creating value is not always reflected in dollar-for-dollar in a changed bottom line. Initially the effort is to open the doors of your institution to diverse audiences and collaborate on programs they want to see. That is what will *keep* the doors open." –Donna Walker-Kuhne, *Invitation to the Party*, pg. 30.

## Examples

### Portland Art Museum

To serve as a platform for increased community dialogue, the Portland Art Museum has become an active partner with dozens of organizations, as well as amplified its communication with the community and the discussion around important cultural issues. The concept was launched in 2008 with China Design Now, when the Museum seeded a community-wide conversation with more than 20 partnering organizations about the evolution of design in China. The Museum now deploys this platform strategy to drive relevance with diverse audiences with all of its major exhibitions. The platform concept was profiled in a [series of articles](#) on FastCompany.com.

### Houston Grand Opera

Houston Grand Opera's initiative develops [locally applicable programming in order to reach the intended audience](#). Much of the programming is developed out of the strong relationships the organization has established with community cultural groups. Staff members engage artists from cultural communities and provide opportunities for them to tell their stories. River of Light tells the story of an Indian immigrant to Houston and was authored by an Indian librettist. The world's first Mariachi opera, Cruzar la Cara de la Luna, celebrates and honors the strong traditions of the Mexican community in Houston.

**"The idea of equity as a component of overall audience development (as opposed to an end in itself) is now a leading component in our conversations regarding audience development strategies. We are also looking at ways to better incorporate equity opportunities into our artistic process through play readings for season selection and broadening our vision for what a 'Third Rail' play can be."**

—Scott Yarborough, Artistic Director, Third Rail Repertory Theatre.  
From the [2013 Portland Equity in the Arts Consortium \(PEAC\) report](#),  
a program of the August Wilson Red Door Project