

National Survey of Dance Audiences

Overview

Dance/USA's Engaging Dance Audiences pilot, which launched in January 2009 with support from the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation and The James Irvine Foundation, included a provision for a national audience study. Dance/USA partnered with WolfBrown to conduct this study—the first field-wide survey intended to answer the question, "How do dance audiences want to engage?" With the help of 42 dance companies and presenters from across the country, more than 7,400 dance audience members completed the survey in July and August 2010. Their responses offer insight into the desires of existing dance audiences, and can help companies and presenters deepen their relationships with this group. Dance/USA has culled three overarching themes from WolfBrown's report¹ on the survey: the first of these recognizes the perspectives of audience members; the second looks at the opportunity for creating community around dance; and the last speaks to the burgeoning use of technology. A closer look at each will enable dance administrators and artists in the field to work toward more deeply engaging with audiences.

One of the most dominant themes coming from this survey is the recognition of the perspectives that audience members bring to dance performances. The survey asked audiences why they attended a dance performance. It is clear from responses, which included about a dozen different reasons, that half of audience members, or 50 percent, attend performances to be inspired or uplifted². Unlike having "an intense emotional experience," which 20 percent of respondents chose, being "inspired or uplifted" suggests that audience members are looking for dance that brightens or lightens the spirit. While these simple totals paint a plain picture of audience motivations, audience motivations vary among dance companies and presenters.³ This variation is in part a result of the different types of work that dance companies and presenters perform for dance audiences. When thinking about how to engage audiences, it is helpful to consider the range of reasons why an audience member is coming to a performance and what role a dance company or presenter has in shaping those motivations.

The corollary to audience members' motivations for attending a performance is that each choreographic work has artistic motivations its creators and performers wish to express. The challenge, then, to artists and administrators is to create and maintain a balance between the motivations of the artists and those of the audience. One way of finding this balance may be fulfilled by providing program notes, which many audience members currently read and will continue to do so, or by adding spoken or video introductions to works from the stage during performances. Most importantly, this means of interaction with audiences demonstrates that just as choreographers and dancers are fed by the creative process, so, too, are dance audiences when they see a live performance.

This survey also points to an opportunity to build a community around dance for audiences. Survey responses indicated that the highest-potential engagement activity is attending open rehearsals⁴. Implicit in this behind-the-scenes interest is a desire to understand what is happening at a performance and to answer the "How'd they do that?" question. Dance companies and presenters have an opportunity here to not only open the creative process

¹ WolfBrown's report on this survey, *How Dance Audiences Engage: Summary Report from a National Survey of Dance Audiences*, is available for download on the Dance/USA website at danceusa.org/edaresearch.

² Page 28.

³ Pages 29 and 30.

⁴ Page 37; "High-potential" means an activity that is currently not being offered or infrequently offered by the dance companies and presenters surveyed, but that audience members have a strong interest in participating.

and allow audience members a peek into the studio or dress rehearsals, but also to encourage audience members to build deeper connections with dance, the organizations, the individual artists, and one another.

When talking with organizations that have successfully incorporated open rehearsals into their process, they speak about how the setting allows audience members to interact with one another in a manner different from performance, and how these interactions are deeper and more lasting. As with the previous theme, opening rehearsals to the public brings a set of challenges to the table. For dance companies, an artistic decision needs to be made about when audience members can be welcomed to the process, as well as addressing logistical issues. Dance presenters, too, can engage audiences through open rehearsals of touring dance companies, but this requires collaboration and agreement on terms between presenters and companies.

In the 21st century, no study is complete without a word about technology. With the standout exception of wanting more access to free dance videos online,⁵ audiences did not respond strongly to technological engagement. When looking at engagement by age segmentation, younger dance audience members report a greater likelihood to engage with dance through technology.⁶ This finding is not surprising, as youth, in general, are more likely to engage with technology overall. For audience members under 35 and those who are also active or serious dancers [dance goers? I thought we were talking about dance audiences not dancers?] ⁷, nearly one third reported high interest in watching videos or podcasts of dance performance on a cell phone, iPod, or computer.⁸ However, a similar level of interest in this activity was not sustained in other [older?] audience segments.

As dance companies and presenters look toward the future of engaging audiences through technology, it is instructive to keep in mind responses to the statement, “Dance can only be truly appreciated by experiencing live performance.” A majority of existing dance audience members agreed with this statement, and this majority held across different segments of the audience—neither varying by age nor by activity level in dance.⁹ Despite the younger respondents’ affinity for technology, they still value live performance just as much as their fellow audience members. For respondents, the experience of live performance is a key component in their relationship with dance. Combining this perspective with a tepid response to technological engagement, it seems that for existing audiences, engagement with dance through technology is not an immediate priority.

The challenge, then, is for dance companies and presenters to support live dance performances while making the most strategic use of technology. For existing audiences, accessing dance through technology has not yet become a substitute for live performance. However, responses from this survey shed little light on what may happen as younger, and more tech savvy, individuals become the majority of the audience in the future.

Taken in their entirety, the themes gathered from the WolfBrown report have the potential to help dance companies and presenters deepen their relationships with existing dance audiences. Recognizing that dance audiences bring their own perspectives and interests to performances allows artists and administrators to program activities that sustain both the audience and the artform. Audiences are interested not only in live performance, but also in understanding what goes into a performance—and they are willing to explore in such community settings as during open rehearsals. And although existing audiences feel strongly about live performance, younger segments of the audience are seeking to engage with dance through technology. While this overview highlights just three themes for the field to consider, the full EDA report points to a wealth of opportunities for the field to consider as dance companies and presenters continue to engage their audiences.

⁵ Page 63.

⁶ Page 49.

⁷ As defined in the WolfBrown report, “‘active or serious dancers’ are people who ‘regularly’ take dance lessons, perform in front of live audiences, or choreograph. They constitute 19% of all buyers (avg. age = 43).” Page 3.

⁸ Page 64.

⁹ Page 60.

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Summary of Key Themes and Observations from *How Dance Audiences Engage*

- A majority of dance buyers are dancing themselves, either socially or more formally. For the purposes of analysis, three cohorts of respondents were defined:
 - “Active or Serious Dancers” are people who “regularly” take dance lessons, perform in front of live audiences or choreograph. They constitute 19 percent of all buyers (avg. age=43).
 - “Social Dancers” are people who dance socially, either regularly or occasionally, but who are not “Active or Serious Dancers.” They constitute 38 percent of all buyers (avg. age=50).
 - The average age of respondents who do not fit into either of these two cohorts is 56 (“Not Dancers”).
- Active or Serious Dancers are, by far, the most engaged audiences; they are most interested in all forms of engagement, especially those that involve movement. A quarter of all dance buyers take dance lessons or classes at least occasionally, and 33 percent used to, earlier in their lives. Another 17 percent haven’t, but would like to try. Only a quarter of dance ticket buyers are not interested in taking dance lessons or classes. Results point to a direct link between attendance and active forms of participation. Any long-term approach to audience development must take an ecological view that encompasses attendance, media-based consumption, and active participation.
 - How can the links between these different parts of the system be strengthened? Professional dance cannot survive in the long run without a support system of participatory dance programs.
- Dance buyers who attend with their parents are 15 years younger, on average, than those who attend with their children or grandchildren (38 vs. 53, respectively). Similarly, those who attend with co-workers are approximately seven years younger than those who do not (44 vs. 51, respectively).
 - Audience development schemes with incentives to “bring your parents” or “bring your co-workers” will naturally attract younger buyers.
- A significant amount of interest was expressed for attending dance performances at which “audience members themselves actually dance or move around.” One-in-four respondents indicated that they haven’t done this, but would like to try. This underscores other findings suggesting a need for more kinetic involvement opportunities. Bear in mind, however, that many audience members are not dancers and are unlikely to respond to activities that involve movement.

- The dominant motivation for attending is spiritual (i.e., “to be inspired or uplifted”). Five distinct but overlapping motivational factors were discerned:
 - 1) Stimulate the Mind (intellectual/creative stimulation)
 - 2) Nurture (social/family fulfillment)
 - 3) Repertoire-driven Motivations (either to see “great works” or new work)
 - 4) Emotional/Spiritual Motivations
 - 5) Social Bridging and Bonding Motivations (i.e., to grow closer to one’s own culture, or to learn about cultures other than one’s own)
- Many dance ticket buyers desire to be further engaged before, during, and after performances. Most fall within the “big middle” of the engagement curve, however: they want to engage a little more, but not a lot. In other words, they may never stay for a post-performance discussion, yet they aspire to engage somewhat more deeply.
- With respect to pre-performance engagement, dance ticket buyers expressed a strong latent desire to watch rehearsals. Other activities with the highest latency scores included: 1) learning a few dance steps from a visiting choreographer or dancer; 2) attending a pre-performance talk about the program; 3) watching a video of the artist(s) discussing their work; 4) listening to the choreographer or artistic director explain an upcoming program; and 5) watching video excerpts of pieces that the artist or company will be performing.
 - One might infer from this a need for a new, field-wide strategy of “opening up the creative process.” What would be the implications of such a strategy for presenters, touring artists, and artist training programs?
- With respect to post-performance engagement, the dominant activity – by a wide margin – is informal discussion on the way home. In other words, the predominant way that dance buyers “make meaning” of a dance performance is through talking about it with the people they came with, on the way home (i.e., outside of the venue).
 - While much energy has been focused on in-venue discussions, the field is clearly in need of a better strategy for catalyzing informal, self-guided discussion outside of our venues.
- Analyzing the levels of involvement, both current and desired, in 30 different engagement activities suggests five underlying dimensions or “factors”:
 - 1) Critical Assessment (48%): filtering information through trusted critics and writers
 - 2) Watching and Talking (46%): gathering information and talking about the experience informally
 - 3) Deep Context and Insight (44%): seeking insight through talks, lectures, discussions, rehearsals
 - 4) Live Interpretation (35%): real-time commentary and interpretive assistance at performances (e.g., spoken introductions)
 - 5) Digital Interactives (33%): express an opinion in an online forum, post to Facebook
- These five factors may provide the field with a framework for thinking about audience engagement, and a way to prioritize further research and development.
- A major shift toward technological means of engagement is underway with younger audiences, but is slow in coming.
 - Younger audiences are categorically more interested in all forms of technology-based engagement, especially through social media. On the whole, however, most dancer buyers are not very interested in consuming dance in digital formats, except for free videos.

WolfBrown's full report on this survey, ***How Dance Audiences Engage: Summary Report from a National Survey of Dance Audiences***, is available for download on the Dance/USA website at danceusa.org/edaresearch.