

Building Deeper Relationships

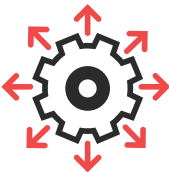
How Steppenwolf Theatre Company is Turning Single-Ticket Buyers Into Repeat Visitors

In Chicago, Steppenwolf Theatre Company launched a major initiative to build long-term relationships with single-ticket buyers to bring non-subscribers back to the theater for multiple performances. Learn how Steppenwolf Theatre Company creates a deeper connection with its audience by developing an ongoing conversation about the work on stage.

Key Themes and Subject Areas



Deepening the Audience Relationship: Market research and focus groups revealed to Steppenwolf that their audience, both single-ticket buyers and subscribers, identify as “lifelong learners.” Steppenwolf uses this information to shape how they engage with their audience and develops programming that supports this mindset using a Public Square metaphor to guide engagement decisions.



Program Development as Connectivity: With the Public Square theme as the framework of new program development, read how Steppenwolf uses lifelong learners’ motives to structure their post-show discussions to facilitate exploration of ideas and the search for meaning. Consistency proves effective as Steppenwolf now offers post-show discussions after each show, available to anyone who attends, opening the community of learning to anyone single-ticket buyers and season-ticket subscribers alike.



Expanding the Conversation: Steppenwolf makes decisions that reflect its understanding of its audience and its desire to build ongoing relationships as it develops online content and special events that deepen artistic dialogue. Steppenwolf extends to its audience the artists’ explorations in creating theater through podcasts, videos, and their blog. Their content and programming are intentionally open-ended and reveal the spirit of inquiry applied by their artists when searching for meaning in work.

These auxiliary content pieces strengthen the relationship with the audience by (1) Keeping the conversation going; (2) Giving the audience an insider’s perspective of creative and production issues the artistic staff and actors face; (3) Empowering the audience to explore their level of interest; (4) Allowing the personality of Steppenwolf artists to come through.



Artistic Opportunities Enhanced: As the opportunity for dialogue cultivates an appreciation of a wide range of theatrical productions within Steppenwolf's audience, the artistic staff can develop a more risk-taking approach to programming supported by content that encourages dialogue with the audience's connectivity to the works. By building an open dialogue with the audience, Steppenwolf finds a way to help their audience connect with very challenging performances, which opens up possibilities for more complicated works to be received over time.

Teaching Concepts

1. How is Steppenwolf using its online content to increase accessibility to its productions? Discuss with **Introductory and Advanced Arts Management and Arts Marketing Students** how Steppenwolf is able to intensify the intellectual discourse they have with their audience through these tools. Use this guide to demonstrate the importance of harnessing what their audience (as lifelong learners) wants and expanding a community based on this information.
2. With **Arts Education or Advanced Arts Management Students**, discover how Steppenwolf gives audiences multiple ways to explore and engage with its artistic programming. By allowing the artistic staff to create the online content, a richer connection is transferred to the audience than would have been possible if they just presented the play alone.
3. For **Introductory or Advanced Arts Administration Students**, explore how Steppenwolf balanced the needs of different audiences through the levels of accessible support materials, "Explore" events, and audience talk-backs and what these efforts contribute to ticket sale patterns. How does Steppenwolf benefit from opening the opportunities to all participants instead of limiting certain engagements to season ticket subscribers?
4. Discuss the importance of full organizational buy-in with **graduate-level arts administration students** and explore how Steppenwolf infused lifelong learners' culture into every department. See how these efforts increased ticket sales and enhanced the community that supports Steppenwolf.

Class Discussion Lead: On page 45, under the section titled, "Aligning the Organization Around the 'Public Square' Vision and Strategy," you read: ***The most successful organizations are those that find ways to articulate [their] vision for staff and build mechanisms to bring the vision to life.*** How does Steppenwolf work to ensure that full-organizational buy-in exists fluidly through each department and therefore, internal consistency is incorporated into every touchpoint with their audience? How does the organization work together to achieve the goal of increasing the audience's ability to assess, observe, and discuss the productions through their metaphor of the Public Square used to explain the emerging relationship between Steppenwolf and its audience?

Read the full case study from The Wallace Foundation [here](#).

This Instructor Guide was written by Jessie Bower on behalf of the Association of Arts Administration Educators.

