

# **Building Deeper Relationships: How Steppenwolf Theatre Company is Turning Single-Ticket Buyers into Repeat Visitors**

## **Instructor Guide**

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

### **Key Themes & Subject Areas**

- 1. 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 the metaphor of a Public Square to guide engagement decisions.
- 2. Program Development as Connectivity:** With the Public Square theme as the framework of new program development, read how Steppenwolf uses the motives of lifelong learners to structure their post-show discussions in a way that facilitates 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.
- 3. 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 their audience the explorations the artists undertake in the process of creating theater through podcasts, videos and their blog. Their content and programming is intentionally open-ended and reveals the spirit of exploration that is applied by their artists

when searching for meaning in the 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 to their level of interest; 4. Allowing the personality of Steppenwolf artists to come through.

4. **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 is able to develop a more risk-taking approach to programming that is 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 works, which opens up possibilities for more difficult 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 the culture of lifelong learners 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 touch point 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?