

# Someone Who Speaks Their Language

## How a Nontraditional Partner Brought New Audiences to Minnesota Opera

With the goal of dispelling preconceived notions about opera among women ages 35 to 60, the Minnesota Opera partnered with an unconventional spokesperson to bring newcomers to its performances. A local talk-radio host and opera buff, with a knack for relating to this specific demographic, made the art form relatable and exciting by discussing opera on air, giving away tickets, and leading a pre-show discussion Tuesday evenings of every production run for ticket winners.

This case study is an excellent review of the challenges an organization can face in attracting and retaining new audiences, and the path to subscription purchase from free ticket win that audience members might follow.

### Key Themes and Subject Areas



**The Power of a Market Influencer** - Ian Punnett, a serious opera-lover and local talk-radio host, was tapped by Minnesota Opera to be an ambassador to reach a demographic critical to the organization's future: women ages 35 to 60. Punnett gave away hundreds of free tickets to Tuesday-night performances at the Minnesota Opera, mostly to women who had never attended opera performances. And, every Tuesday, Punnett co-hosted Opera Insights with Artistic Director Johnson, infusing the conversation with anecdotes that made opera feel more accessible to newcomers.

Ian's fans trusted him and valued his opinions, which helped break down perceptual barriers held about opera by listeners prior to the partnership between Punnett and Minnesota Opera. As Punnett increased the number of his talking points about opera on air, the concept of attending a performance became more comfortable for the target market. The increased frequency, coupled with the ticket giveaways, brought hundreds of new audience members to Minnesota Opera productions.



**Marketing and Communication** - Explore how Minnesota Opera worked with myTalk 107.1 to spread the word about their performances. Live on-air endorsements, pre-recorded commercials, ticket giveaways, opera insights discussions, on-air interviews and a partnership with KSTP-TV were all part of the marketing efforts implemented to capture this target audience. Learn what works and what doesn't and how authenticity plays a role in enthusiasm.



**Barriers to Return Ticket Purchase** - Minnesota Opera gradually encouraged ticket purchases from its new audience members, following an action track that understood that time is needed to progress individuals from (Point A) receiving free tickets to (Point B) purchasing seasonal subscriptions. The action track is illustrated on page 32 and includes steps such as moving from free to a \$20 ticket, followed by a half-price ticket purchase that leads to 25% off a regular subscription. Data was used to track consumer behavior to understand which deals were taken by individuals following their initial free performance.

## Teaching Concepts

1. Discuss the complexities of audience development with **Introductory and Advanced Arts Management and Arts Marketing Students**. Use this guide to compare and contrast the benefits of ticket giveaways and expectations that are created by freebies. How did Minnesota Opera overcome the expectations that their performances could be discount cultural activities for the radio listeners, and what steps did they take to create sustained relationships with this audience? Did it work?
2. With **Arts Marketing or Advanced Arts Management Students**, consider the highly experimental approach taken by Minnesota Opera to get new people in the door. Discuss the risks taken and why some of the efforts did not work out. What role did Punnett's passion for opera contribute to influencing his audiences and why did the TV giveaways not prove as effective?
3. For **Introductory or Advanced Arts Administration Students**, examine the action track used to encourage ticket and subscription purchases by ticket giveaway winners. What assumptions were made in the beginning and how did the employees pivot their offerings along the way in order to keep their new audience members engaged? What subscription packages and promotions were created and why?
4. With **Arts Marketing or Advanced Arts Management Students**, learn from focus groups of the target audience how persistent messaging by a trusted influencer allowed them to gradually warm to the idea of attending an opera and mitigate risk and concern that they might not like a show they are unfamiliar with. See how Minnesota Opera took this information and applied it to their marketing efforts to reach more people and make their performances more accessible.

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.

