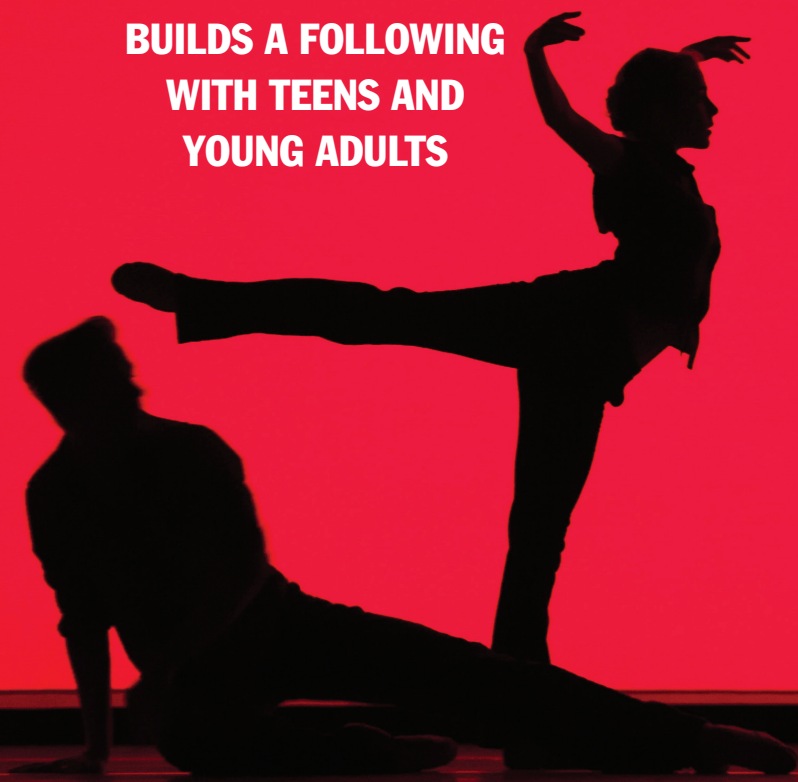


GETTING PAST "IT'S NOT FOR PEOPLE LIKE US"

**PACIFIC NORTHWEST BALLET
BUILDS A FOLLOWING
WITH TEENS AND
YOUNG ADULTS**



Bob Harlow and Tricia Heywood

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PREFACE

This case study describes how the Pacific Northwest Ballet brought thousands of teens and young adults to its performances. It is part of a larger set of 10 case studies commissioned by The Wallace Foundation to explore arts organizations' efforts to reach new audiences and deepen relationships with their existing audiences. These in-depth reports lay out how the efforts were created and run, describe the results in detail, identify what helped them become successful, and show what got in the way of success. They add to a growing body of field-based research, providing specific examples of individual organizations' responses to unique circumstances. At the same time, each aspires to capture more-broadly applicable lessons about what works and what does not—and why—in building arts audiences.

The individual case studies are the products of multiple interviews with key staff and analysis of program elements, budgets, and planning documents. Unlike similar efforts, however, each draws from a multifaceted base of data and evidence collected over a period of several years, including ticket purchases, online activity, and participation in a broad array of programming, as well as qualitative and quantitative research undertaken by independent consultants and the organizations themselves to inform program development and to evaluate results. That research was integral to each program, and of such importance that in 2015 The Wallace Foundation will publish a

companion guide on using research to support audience building that draws from practices and examples employed across the 10 organizations.

Each case study in this series begins with a brief executive summary and a “scene setter” describing an actual component of the program. That is followed by an overview of the environment within which the organization was operating, its audience-building challenges, and the program it built to address those challenges. Detail follows about strategy and tactics, and key decisions and adjustments made as the organization developed its approach and refined it in response to new information. Additional specifics are provided on how progress was measured and what results occurred, and an analysis highlighting elements that led to success follows.

Pacific Northwest Ballet is part of a second round of case studies. The first round included four organizations, and this second round contains six. The 10 arts groups encompass variety in size, geography, and art form. Perhaps more importantly, each organization’s strategy and set of tactics are different, providing planning details and considerations across diverse programs and circumstances.

The experiences of the organizations as a whole reveal several recurring themes. When the first four case studies were published in 2011, we highlighted five general principles:

1. Market research can sharpen engagement-strategy development and execution.
2. Audiences are open to engaging in the arts in new and different ways.
3. Audience building is an ongoing endeavor, not a one-time initiative.
4. Audience-building efforts should be fully integrated

into every element of an organization’s operations, not approached as a separate initiative or program.

5. Programs that emerge from a clear and well-supported organizational mission develop in environments in which they can thrive.

These themes are reinforced in the experiences of the six organizations in the second group of case studies and were more fully developed (alongside additional effective practices) in a recent Wallace Foundation publication, *The Road to Results: Effective Practices for Building Arts Audiences* (that report and other audience-building resources are available at <http://www.wallacefoundation.org>).

While the individual reports provide details of particular strategies, the collective experience across the organizations also suggests that there is no one winning tactic, no killer promotion, no social media strategy that alone will help organizations build audiences in a sustainable way. Instead, successful audience building is an integrated and coordinated effort with several parts of an organization working together over several years’ time, more often than not in the face of very slow progress or setbacks. Pacific Northwest Ballet’s artistic director, for example, initiated the effort to bring in younger audiences, and programs developed by the marketing department to support that objective created a momentum that propelled the organization’s success year after year. That kind of ongoing partnership is essential, because it takes time for an organization to learn how to connect with a new audience, and once that public begins to respond, it takes time to develop a steady following. But, while organizations may have to operate differently to connect with new audiences, that does not mean they need to change who they are or what they produce. In fact, such

a strategy may backfire, because an audience engagement initiative that departs from an organization's mission or core values likely will not receive the broad and ongoing support needed to maintain it.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A great many individuals and organizations assisted us in our research, and we want to express our heartfelt appreciation. First, this work would not have been possible without the generous support of The Wallace Foundation. We would also like to express our appreciation for their guidance and support to The Wallace Foundation staff members Lucas Held, Ed Pauly, Jessica Schwartz, Daniel Windham, Will Miller, and Christine Yoon. Ann Stone of The Wallace Foundation was an important strategic advisor from the project's beginnings to its conclusions. As editor, Aaron Dalton helped focus and simplify a complex narrative. Pamela Mendels of The Wallace Foundation helped us refine the draft for additional clarity and completeness.

We are grateful to Ellen Walker and the Pacific Northwest Ballet staff for their responsiveness and openness in sharing both insights and data. We were also fortunate to have received feedback on direction and an earlier draft of this work from Caleb Custer, Jim Hirsch of the Chicago Sinfonietta, Jo LaBrecque of Wolf Trap Foundation for the Performing Arts, Sandra Bernhard of Houston Grand Opera, and Julie Crites of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Of course, the final responsibility for the questions posed and conclusions drawn rests with us.

Bob Harlow

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

When Peter Boal became artistic director of Seattle’s Pacific Northwest Ballet (PNB) in 2005, he prioritized building teen and young adult audiences. Beyond just making it easier for teens to access the ballet, he wanted them to see the art form as relevant to their lives. That meant taking a long-term view, thinking first about what was keeping these audiences away, and then developing and deploying a multifaceted strategy to chip away at those barriers and build that audience over time.

While recently developed low-price-ticket programs brought in some young newcomers, Marketing Director Ellen Walker was convinced PNB would need to change how teens and young adults thought about ballet and the company in order to build a sizable following among them. Anecdotal evidence convinced her the organization’s online presence could hold the key, but only if PNB made some improvements. Teens and young adults who knew PNB said the website did not reflect the excitement of attending a performance. Those unfamiliar with the company said they could not find enough of the audiovisual content they seek when researching new cultural options. Without such content, they found it hard to get to know PNB from the outside. Moreover, both the website and some of PNB’s advertising materials inadvertently reinforced preconceived views of some teens and young adults that ballet would be boring or stuffy.

Determined to make it easier for young people to get to know the company, its artists, and its work, Walker and her team embarked on an ambitious mission to overhaul PNB's external communications, website, and social media activity. The strategy looked beyond promotions of individual programs and considered how to impact overall perceptions of the company. PNB developed a steady stream of videos that showed daily life inside studios and performance spaces to give viewers an idea of what they could expect at a performance. These behind-the-scenes videos soon won thousands of YouTube fans and millions of annual views. At the same time, the company ramped up its social media presence on platforms like Twitter and Facebook, while also redesigning and relaunching its website to improve its visual appeal, add more functionality, and make it easier to navigate. Guided by market research findings, PNB overhauled its other communications materials to look more inviting and make the art form appear more accessible—changing colors, using images that conveyed emotion and immediacy, even updating fonts and logos.

Meanwhile, PNB introduced new ways for young audience members to find their place in the ballet world. A teen-only preview of PNB's Next Step choreographers showcase gave teens an exclusive opportunity to socialize with their peers while being the first audience to see newly created work. A continuing partnership with a Seattle arts access organization called TeenTix gave PNB a way to draw hundreds of teens per performance by offering heavily discounted day-of-show tickets and sparking conversation among TeenTix members. Just as importantly, PNB made sure that teens and young adults felt welcomed as valued patrons once they got to the performance hall.

These efforts are starting to pay off. Over a four-year time period, PNB's ticket sales to teens more than doubled and ticket

sales to young adults under age 25 rose by 20 percent. In contrast, a subscription program for patrons ages 25 to 39 lacked the dedicated marketing push that the programs for other age groups received, and it stalled. PNB is now shifting tactics for that group. Younger audience members may not be adding much to the bottom line right now, but Boal sees these initiatives as planting the seeds that will grow into PNB's future base of audience members and supporters.

It's opening night for the Pacific Northwest Ballet's February 2013 production of Roméo et Juliette and dozens of the audience members are teenagers. These teens weren't dragged here by parents and they didn't come on a school trip, they purchased their own \$5 tickets through a program called TeenTix that offers teens heavily discounted day-of-show tickets to performances in the Seattle area.

A group of teens approaches the box office to pick up their tickets. It's their first time at the ballet and they are a little apprehensive about whether they will be welcomed or just grudgingly accepted. So they are relieved when the box office staff member gives them a big smile, thanks them for coming to the show, and hands them their tickets.

In fact, PNB Artistic Director Peter Boal has given everyone from the box office staff to the ushers to the house manager explicit instructions to make sure that teen patrons—including the TeenTix crowd—feel completely welcome and at ease. Boal knows that the TeenTix patrons haven't added much to the evening's ticket receipts, but he is passionately committed to attracting a young audience. He sees it as planting seeds that will bear fruit years down the road, when the teenagers grow up to become PNB's adult patrons, advocates, and donors.

Five hundred teens eventually see Roméo et Juliette over its nine performances, a testament to the groundwork that PNB has done to build enthusiasm among this age group—using social media to reach them in a way they are accustomed to, creating a teen-only

preview of the Next Step new choreography showcase, and publishing regular videos on YouTube showing what goes on in the rehearsal studios and dance excerpts at various stages of preparation to give audiences who have never attended ballet an idea of what to expect at a performance.

As the teens settle into their seats throughout the auditorium, some of the adults sitting next to them and leafing through their programs come across an announcement from PNB explaining the TeenTix program and encouraging them to make their young neighbors feel welcome (a gesture that caused one TeenTix blogger to call PNB “totally, totally, totally awesome”). The announcements do their job, prompting some friendly intergenerational conversations.

Soon the curtain goes up and the teens—like the rest of the audience—are enthralled by the dance action on stage. After the performance, if they have any questions about what they’ve seen, audience members of all ages will have plenty of time to ask Boal in his usual post-show Q&A session. They can also discuss the show online with their peers on PNB’s Facebook page or on PNB’s own website, where they are encouraged (through an e-mail invitation) to leave feedback. Some TeenTix patrons may also post reviews of the show on the TeenTix blog. One reviewer summed up his feelings on a 2010 production featuring the work of choreographer Ulysses Dove by urging his fellow teens, “Do not, under any circumstances, miss out on this.” This enthusiasm is not uncommon; PNB consistently ranks as the most popular organization among TeenTix audiences.

For some teens, this is just one performance among many TeenTix shows they’ll attend throughout Seattle. For others, this may be the beginning of a lifelong love affair with ballet in general and PNB in particular. Over the past four years, PNB has seen teen audiences double and young audiences under age 25 grow by 20 percent, suggesting that the seeds Boal and PNB have planted are starting to grow.

REVERSING A TREND OF DECLINING YOUNG ADULT ATTENDANCE

In 2005, Peter Boal became artistic director of the Pacific Northwest Ballet (PNB) in Seattle, Washington. Well aware of the alarming attendance trends affecting many art forms in the United States, he was determined to do something about them. Since 1982, when the National Endowment for the Arts first began conducting its *Survey of Public Participation in the Arts*, the traditional art forms of classical music, opera, and ballet have seen sharp attendance declines, with approximately 35 percent fewer adults attending in 2012 than when the survey was originally conducted 30 years prior.¹ As Table 1 shows, this trend has been especially dramatic among ballet audiences under age 44. The average age of audience members has risen as a result, contributing to what some call the “graying” of arts audiences.

Some attribute the decline to diminished arts education in public schools. Others say that young people’s leisure preferences and habits have changed to the point where they are reluctant to sit quietly for hours while watching a performance. Regardless of the cause, Boal shares the perspective of many arts managers who believe that reversing this trend and attracting young people is vital for the survival of their art forms. “My darkest fear in the back of my mind is that in 80 years, we won’t have ballet,” says Boal.

1. National Endowment for the Arts, *2012 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts*, October 2014 revision (Washington, D.C.: National Endowment for the Arts, 2014), <http://arts.gov/sites/default/files/highlights-from-2012-SPPA-revised-11-14.pdf>.

Table 1. Attendance at Ballets by Adults of Different Age Groups in the United States

	1982	1992	2002	2012	Change rate since 1982	Change rate since 2002
18-24	3.9%	5.3%	2.6%	2.4%	-38.5%	-7.7%
25-34	4.8%	4.8%	3.5%	3.1%	-35.4%	-11.4%
35-44	6.0%	4.9%	4.9%	2.8%	-53.3%	-42.9%
45-54	3.7%	5.0%	5.1%	2.3%	-37.8%	-54.9%
55-64	3.7%	4.8%	3.3%	3.0%	-18.9%	-9.1%
65-74	3.0%	4.1%	3.3%	3.3%	10.0%	0%
75+	1.6%	1.9%	2.2%	1.9%	18.8%	-13.6%
All Ages	4.2%	4.7%	3.9%	2.7%	-35.7%	-30.8%

Source: Survey of Public Participation in the Arts: Trend Tables 2008 (Washington, D.C.: National Endowment for the Arts), <http://arts.gov/sites/default/files/trends.pdf>, 7; 2012 statistics derived from Survey of Public Participation in the Arts: Raw Aggregate SPSS Data File 1982-2012 (Washington, D.C.: National Endowment for the Arts), http://arts.gov/sites/default/files/sppa1982-2012_spss.sav_.zip

Boal recognized that many young people fail to see the relevance of traditional art forms like ballet, opera, and orchestral music to their own lives. “They feel ballet is more for their grandparents than themselves,” he admits. At the same time, he was not willing to accept this generational disconnect as an immutable fact. He knew that young audiences have strong emotional connections to some other types of art and entertainment. “There are certain performing arts that young audiences *do* care about,” says Boal. “They care about hearing a musical group. They care about certain films. I want ballet to be in that category.”

Young audiences have always been important to PNB, but they became an even greater focus when Boal succeeded founding Artistic Directors Kent Stowell and Franca Russell in 2005. Founded in 1972 as part of Seattle Opera, PNB became an independent entity in 1977 and grew to over 40 dancers under the artistic leadership of Stowell and Russell. By 2012, PNB had

become the fifth-largest ballet company by budget in the United States.² Along the way, PNB gained an international reputation for performance excellence, in addition to providing world-class ballet training in its PNB School.

PNB had built its strong reputation on a collection of full-length classical ballets and works by George Balanchine, and Boal was intent upon preserving that legacy. But he also believed there was room to introduce more contemporary ballet into the repertoire, with works by recent choreographers such as Jerome Robbins, Christopher Wheeldon, Twyla Tharp, and Ulysses Dove. These contemporary works not only represented different styles of dance and music, but also presented characters from everyday life that might resonate more with modern audiences. He hoped that presenting diverse styles—as opposed to focusing exclusively on either classical or contemporary

2. DanceUSA, *National Company Roster*, <http://www.danceusa.org/nationalcompanyroster>, accessed June 22, 2014.

PACIFIC NORTHWEST BALLET (PNB) AT A GLANCE

- Founded in 1972, PNB has grown from regional troupe to world-renowned dance company with 46 dancers; based in Seattle
 - Mission:
 - Set new standards for artistic excellence, innovation, and creativity
 - Attract the most talented dancers, choreographers, musicians, collaborative artists, staff, and volunteers
 - Educate and develop dance artists as well as enthusiasts
 - Captivate a devoted, supportive, continually growing, and diverse audience
 - Strengthen our financial and organizational foundation
 - Major activities:
 - Dance performance: Mount 100 performances per year of six mixed-repertory or full-length productions, including *Nutcracker*, in Marion Oliver McCaw Hall, reaching annual audiences of more than 250,000
 - Ballet training: Train 1,100 students ages 2 to 18 in Seattle and Bellevue, Washington, each year in a professional-track curriculum; educate more than 500 teens and adults in over 200 amateur classes weekly
 - Outreach programming: Engage 14,000 adults and children in movement, analysis, and appreciation of ballet in schools and lecture series
 - Operating budget: approximately \$23 million
 - Wallace Excellence Award: \$750,000 over four years
 - Former Executive Director: David Brown
 - Artistic Director: Peter Boal
 - Former Marketing Director (current Executive Director): Ellen Walker
-
-

ballet—would give audiences multiple opportunities to discover work that aligned with their personal tastes and experiences:

I don't want to be just innovative or just traditional. I want PNB to keep walking both of those paths, because we have some audience members who like both types and some who only like one or the other. I've brought in new Balanchine works and refreshed some of the story ballets, plus we have added a lot of newer contemporary works. I believe our core audience should see everything.

At the same time that Boal was expanding the repertoire, he was also setting his sights on attracting younger audiences. While he knew the organization had to sustain its traditional base, he made it a top priority to plant what he calls “the seeds” of PNB’s future audience. Like Balanchine, who had been his mentor, Boal believed it was essential to offer low ticket prices, which not only bring ballet within economic reach of a broader audience, but also signal that the art form belongs to everyone. “Everybody has to have that accessibility,” says Boal, “Not just the ramps for the wheelchairs, but also the prices, so that everybody feels that the ballet is for them.”

“EVERYBODY HAS TO HAVE THAT ACCESSIBILITY. NOT JUST THE RAMPS FOR THE WHEELCHAIRS, BUT ALSO THE PRICES, SO EVERYBODY FEELS THAT BALLET IS FOR THEM.”

1. LOWER TICKET PRICES BRING IN YOUNG PEOPLE, BUT THAT IS JUST THE BEGINNING

Before Boal's arrival, PNB had the usual sorts of programs that many performing arts organizations use to attract young adult audiences, including:

- Half-price Student Rush tickets available day of show for student ID holders
- A discounted subscription available to university students
- Backstage Pass, a social program targeting professionals ages 21 to 39, created to cultivate patrons, peer advocates, and future donors. For an annual membership fee of \$50, members received discounted tickets and subscriptions, and access to intermission and post-performance gatherings where they could socialize with peers and PNB artists.

The Student Rush sold in excess of 500 tickets per season, but was limited to those holding a valid student ID. As for Backstage Pass, membership seemed to stall at around 100 or so members. That program was important, but it was designed around development objectives, not the accessibility that Boal wanted to provide. To provide that accessibility, PNB created several new low-price opportunities to attend the ballet:

- **Friday Rehearsal Previews.** Five-dollar one-hour performance previews on four Fridays each year (later expanded to six) beginning October 2005, and hosted by Boal and his artistic staff in PNB's rehearsal studios. Anyone could purchase the \$5 tickets (increased to \$10 during the 2009–2010 season) and a broad audience of all ages regularly sold out the 200-seat capacity.
- **25 & Under.** Beginning fall 2007, patrons ages 25 and

under could buy two tickets for \$25 (or one ticket for \$15) for Friday performances, relatively slow nights for PNB because they fell between the Thursday opening and Saturday, the strongest night for ticket sales.³ The program was an immediate success: PNB regularly sold more than 250 tickets per production just six months after the program launched.

- **TeenTix.** In 2005, PNB became a partner of TeenTix, an arts access program that offers teenagers \$5 day-of-show tickets for nearly 60 partner organizations throughout Seattle. More than just a reduced-price ticket program, TeenTix provides opportunities for its 20,000 active members to engage with one another through TeenTix's Facebook, Twitter, and Flickr pages, as well as on the TeenTix blog, Seattle's largest source of youth-centric arts coverage, which features posts from a select group of TeenTix members. By 2008 PNB had become one of the best-attended organizations in the TeenTix program.

2. A MISSING LINK: HELPING TEENS AND YOUNG ADULTS SEE THEMSELVES AT PNB

Despite the success of these three new initiatives, PNB Marketing Director Ellen Walker saw an even greater opportunity to move from ticket sales to building that relevance with teens and young adults that Boal was trying to achieve. When Walker met with TeenTix reviewers and other young audience members, she often got the impression they saw PNB

3. At that time programs ran for a total of nine performances. They opened on Thursday, with performances also on Friday evening, a Saturday matinee and evening, and then the following Thursday evening, Friday evening, Saturday matinee and evening, and Sunday matinee.

as somewhat aloof—even if they had enjoyed a performance. This perception did not surprise Walker. She knew ballet, opera, and to some extent orchestral music all carry some perceptual baggage that causes many young people to assume such art forms will be stuffy and unwelcoming. She also recognized that websites are the principal channels young adults use to obtain information about arts organizations and engage with them.⁴ To counter perceptions of PNB as aloof and build a sense among young audience members that they were welcome at the organization, she knew that PNB would need to communicate and meet with these teens and young adults “in the venues where they live—and that’s online.”

Unfortunately, PNB’s website (pnb.org, see Figure 1 and Colorplate 1) was difficult to navigate and visually dated. Walker heard anecdotally from many teens and young adults who had been to PNB that the website did not communicate the excitement of the company. “We had all these programs in place to attract young people and then they got online and encountered a website that looked like Courtyard by Marriott,” says Walker. “So they think, ‘Well, that’s not me . . . the gray, the maroon . . . the dancers in these little boxes.’”

What’s more, young people expected to find video and other types of digital content on the website that would help them learn about the company and its artists, as well as its school and teachers. But there was hardly any such content there or anywhere else on the web, which unintentionally made PNB seem distant and unapproachable. PNB was simply unprepared to interact with this digital generation. Says Walker:

4. LaPlaca Cohen, *Culture Track 2011 Market Research Report* (New York: LaPlaca Cohen), 23. Available online at http://www.laplacacohen.com/old_site/culturetrack/2011/LaPlacaCohen_CultureTrack_2011_Report.pdf.

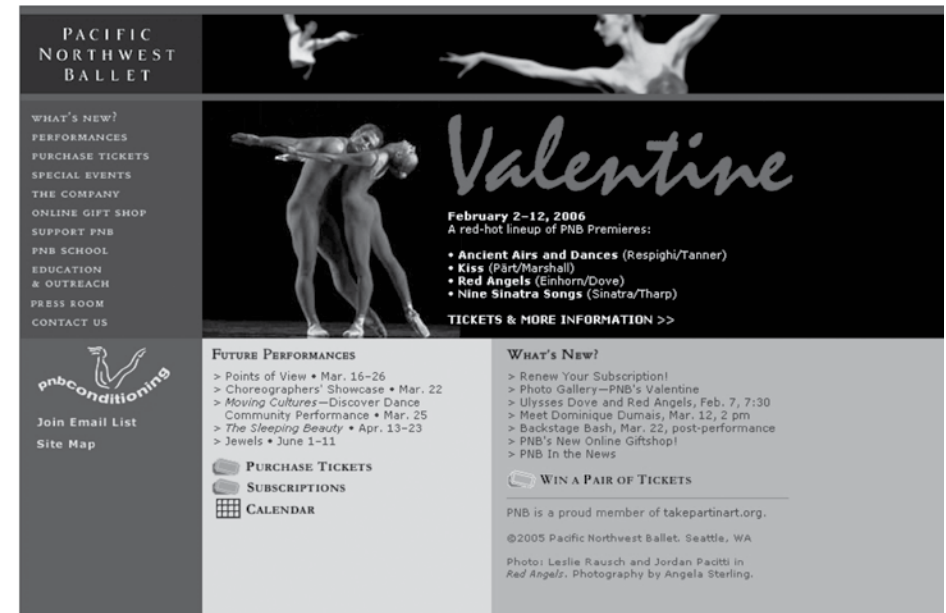


Figure 1. pnb.org Homepage in Early 2006

They would say things like, “I don’t really like your website, it’s so clunky and it’s hard to move around,” or, “Where’s the video? You’ve got people my age dancing in your company, but why can’t I see them and hear what their voices sound like?” And we also heard feedback from our students, who were disappointed that they could not find videos of the faculty online and could not research their teaching style. For a visual art form like ours, we were really missing a big opportunity.

The bottom line was that it was hard for young people to get to know PNB. Walker believed PNB’s website needed to do more than just deliver factual program and logistics information—it

needed to invite people to get to know PNB. In addition, many PNB staff members had started to feel the website was difficult to navigate and lacked basic functionality (e.g., seat selection). They saw a need to improve the online experience for all PNB patrons.

Following Boal's artistic direction, Walker wanted to overhaul the website to better convey the inclusive spirit of

**IT WAS HARD
FOR YOUNG
PEOPLE TO GET
TO KNOW PNB.**

encompassing different traditions under the broad umbrella of artistic excellence in ballet. At the same time, the company would revisit how it presented itself to young audiences in other communications,

such as advertising, to strengthen this message of inclusivity. The goal was to present PNB as a company that would make all sorts of dance lovers feel at home, and give them opportunities to explore the full range of the art form both in the performance hall and online. As Walker recalls: "We wanted to create convenience, to create dialogue, and to create a sense of belonging for everyone. So with the brand we wanted to say, 'We're all these things under the umbrella and there's a place for you here.'"

To support this strategy, PNB applied for and received a four-year (2009–2012) \$750,000 Wallace Excellence Award from The Wallace Foundation. The award supported the website redesign, allowed PNB to update its visual brand identity, funded an expansion of PNB's in-house video production capabilities, and underwrote a research program that helped PNB gain a better understanding of how to connect with teens and young adults. The company focused on young people, but many components of the engagement strategy would serve all of PNB's audiences.

RESEARCH WITH YOUNG AUDIENCES TO CLARIFY BARRIERS AND HONE THE STRATEGY

Believing that the website and other communications could do a better job connecting the company with teens and young adults, PNB staff conducted two rounds of focus groups (see sidebar) that explored teen and young adult perceptions of PNB and how the company's website and advertising drove those perceptions. This qualitative research was augmented by a quantitative survey administered to a broader audience that examined general arts and culture attendance patterns, in addition to motivations for and barriers to attending PNB.⁵

As discussed below, four themes emerged across the different research components and guided PNB's strategy development. None of these themes surprised PNB staffers, but the level of detail provided by the research gave PNB the information it needed to hone its strategies for breaking through these barriers.

5. Focus group research is a qualitative research technique, which means that it relies on non-numerical data (such as verbal descriptions) and is used to explore and provide an understanding of ideas and concepts. That exploration was important at this stage because PNB wanted to discover the range of perceptions people held about the company and where they came from. Quantitative research such as conducting surveys is better suited to providing the more definite measurements (via numerical data such as percentages and other statistics) PNB sought on audience attendance patterns.

PNB AUDIENCE RESEARCH

Two Phases of Focus Groups with Teens and Young Adults

Phase 1: Web and Brand Identity. In 2009, PNB conducted eight focus groups exploring teen and young adult perceptions of ballet and PNB, and reactions to PNB's website and branded communications. Two groups were conducted with each of the four following age segments: 13 to 17, 18 to 25, 26 to 35, and 36 and over. Within each age segment, PNB conducted one focus group with people who had attended at least one PNB performance and one with those who had never attended a PNB performance.

Phase 2: Advertising and Promotions. In 2010, PNB conducted an additional four focus groups with teens and young adults who were good audience candidates—they had attended two different genres of cultural events in the past year, but had not recently visited PNB. These groups further explored teen and young adult perceptions of ballet and PNB, and also examined reactions to PNB's advertising, programming, and pricing strategies. One group included teens (ages 13 to 17), one young adults (18 to 24), and two post-college but less than 35 years old (ages 22 to 34).

General Arts Audiences Survey. In 2011, PNB conducted a broader online survey with 584 people in the Seattle/Tacoma area who had attended one or more cultural events in the previous 12 months. Survey respondents included 419 teens and young adults through age 35, and 165 adults ages 36 to 75. Survey respondents ranged from those who were unaware of PNB to those who considered themselves long-term patrons. This phase of the research focused on providing insights into respondents' motivations for engaging or not engaging with specific arts organizations and art forms in the region.

1. RESEARCH FINDING NO. 1: YOUNG AUDIENCES THINK THEY WON'T UNDERSTAND BALLET, SO THEY STAY AWAY

Focus group quotes:

I hesitate to go to something like that because I feel like I might get in there and then go, "Wow, I feel like an idiot," because I don't know what's going on. (Age 22 to 34)

I feel like I have to know something about it to appreciate it. (Age 13 to 17)

Teens and younger adults spontaneously mentioned price as a barrier to attending ballet. When pressed, however, they said that they would be willing to pay for something they liked, but because they knew little or nothing about ballet, they had no compelling reason to attend. Their comments suggested that their unfamiliarity with ballet runs deep. First, they don't know what to expect at a ballet performance and believe they need to have some inside knowledge to appreciate it. Second, they worry about being able to follow the story on stage. While they feel the stories are easy to follow at a play or a musical, they expect to feel lost at a ballet. Finally, they assume the music will be classical, a genre with which they have little familiarity.

Constantly online and with so much information at their fingertips, teens and young adults expect to be able to get a good sense of what a performance will be like before they commit to

**TEENS AND YOUNG
ADULTS EXPECT
TO GET A GOOD
SENSE OF WHAT A
PERFORMANCE WILL
BE LIKE BEFORE
BUYING TICKETS.**

purchasing tickets. While many of the young research participants were aware of PNB, most of them knew little about the company beyond its annual performance of *Nutcracker*, which a number of them had seen as children. With the exception of advertising for *Nutcracker* around Christmastime, PNB did not appear in the information channels they used. They also did not know anything about individual PNB dancers, which posed a problem because teens and young adults in the focus groups said they are usually only drawn to performances where they are already familiar with the artists or works being presented.

2. RESEARCH FINDING NO. 2: YOUNG AUDIENCES EXPECT BALLET TO BE BORING AND STUFFY

Focus group quotes:

It's not like music, where there's 50 million variants of everything and you can mix and remix the songs and whatever. It's always just the same. (Age 13 to 17)

It seems like a very formal evening, something you maybe wouldn't do with a large group of friends. (Age 18 to 24)

You can't stop and have drinks and talk in between sets or when things aren't going on; you can't socialize as much at it. (Age 22 to 34)

They may not have much familiarity with ballet, but young people do have preconceived notions about what ballet performances are like. PNB was not surprised when the research showed that teens and young adults generally view the ballet as primarily for people unlike them. They believed it would be staid,

Table 2. Reasons for Not Attending Ballet in the Past

	Younger Adults (n=69-70)	Older Adults (n=97-98)
It's too expensive	57%	36%
It seems boring	49%	45%
It would be too formal and stuffy for me	31%	11%
Ballets all seem the same and there's not much variety	20%	7%

Bolded percentages are significantly higher than statistics in the opposite column at 95% confidence.

long, and boring, allowing no possibility for the social interaction they look for when going out.⁶ They assumed the art form would involve only classical music and require formal dress, and that the audience would be mostly older people. Accordingly, they thought they would “feel out of place” or, as one teen said, it would be “like sitting with someone else’s parents”—a far cry from the comfortable experience that young people covet and nothing like the sense of belonging, relevance, and inclusivity that PNB hoped to create.

Unfortunately, these perceptions were widespread. PNB’s survey of culturally active residents of the surrounding Seattle and Tacoma area revealed that just 13 percent of the respondents to the 2011 General Arts Audiences survey ages 35 and younger said they believed ballet was “for someone like me.” Large numbers of those who had not attended said they were

6. PNB’s research findings align with the conclusions of others who have studied this demographic. For instance, the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum conducted research in 2008 showing that young adults prefer to visit museums with friends and are attracted by a casual, interactive atmosphere. See Bob Harlow et al., *More Than Just a Party: How the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum Boosted Participation by Young Adults* (New York: Wallace Studies in Building Arts Audiences, 2011), <http://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/audience-development-for-the-arts/strategies-for-expanding-audiences/Pages/Wallace-Studies-in-Building-Arts-Audiences-More-Than-Just-a-Party.aspx>.

deterred because it was “boring” (see Table 2). Young adults were much more likely than older adults to say they were deterred by the expense, and that they thought ballet would be “formal and stuffy” and offer little variety. (Greater detail on the survey is provided under “General Arts Audiences Survey” in the PNB Audience Research sidebar on page 18).

Although ballet didn’t seem at first glance to match teens’ and young adults’ preference for casual, social, interactive events involving groups of friends, PNB saw an opening to engage with both groups, because many responded positively to the idea of a peer-group event organized around the ballet.

3. RESEARCH FINDING NO. 3: PNB ADVERTISING DID NOT ENTICE YOUNG AUDIENCES

Focus group quotes:

It’s just boring. It’s like a muted color, backdrop of somebody in a weird pose. (Age 22 to 34)

It’s a very traditional ballet-looking picture to me. It’s something that didn’t necessarily make me want to see the show, so I didn’t even bother reading the text. The picture has to be eye-catching first, and make me want to read what it has to say. (Age 18 to 24)

Not only do they look like they’re in pain . . . but the colors . . . it’s beige on black, it’s brown on black, it’s beige-brown on black, or it’s black and white. I like color. (Age 22 to 34)

PNB’s advertising, while likely effective with already committed audiences, did little to challenge teens’ and young adults’ preconceived notions about ballet. It employed a fairly dark color scheme—browns, yellows, and reds on a black background—that

conveyed staid decorum. Teens and young adults described the advertisements as traditional and boring. Much of the advertising at the time featured on stage performance photos that showed the dancers from a distance. These photos gave focus group participants the muted feeling of looking at the performance “through a keyhole.” PNB occasionally used close-up photos of dancers holding positions that showcased precision and technical prowess, but to teens and young adults, these difficult stances just looked awkward.

Some of the visuals in PNB’s advertising also reinforced unhelpful stereotypes. For example, focus group participants reported that visuals of diamond tiaras and tutus made them think of ballet as elitist and expensive. More contemporary images did, however, have the power to surprise them. One ad that featured a dancer outside wearing blue jeans caught their attention by taking ballet out of its stereotyped context (e.g., wearing a tutu or performing on stage).

Teens and young adults in the focus groups said that the advertising text did not provide enough information. Essential information such as times, ticket prices, and ticket purchase options—well known to current audiences—was missing. That led the young people to assume that tickets would be difficult to obtain and probably too expensive for them.

Focus group participants responded better to “advertising that looks like advertising”—colorful, attention-getting, and attractive, with information about pricing and scheduling. While they found it hard to connect with images of dancers on stage, they responded more positively to promotional materials featuring bright colors where they could clearly see the emotion in the dancers’ faces.

4. RESEARCH FINDING NO. 4: THE WEBSITE DID NOT ENGAGE YOUNG AUDIENCES

Focus group quotes:

They are supposedly representing the essence of movement, but it wasn't there. (Age 26 to 35)

It's really boring, even the font. It wasn't bold or trying to get my attention. (Age 13 to 17)

Participants in the 2009 Web and Brand Identity focus groups echoed the views of TeenTix reviewers and PNB students in saying that PNB's website did not excite them. Those who had attended performances thought the online experience did not reflect their in-person experiences as audience members. Walker sums up some of those reactions:

We just kept hearing these types of reactions over and over again. There was a lot about the look and feel and the disconnect between the organization and the website, or between the performance experience and the website. We are a contemporary, relevant organization and it didn't feel that way online.

Many said they thought the website made PNB seem aloof and a little tired. "The website didn't do anything to dispel these perceptions," says Walker. "It did not have the kind of freshness that we feel is part of our identity."

In addition, research participants expressed the same disappointment TeenTix reviewers and PNB students did over the lack of online video and photographs from PNB that would give them an idea of what to expect at performances. Some focus group participants mentioned that they would be receptive to

Table 3. Engagement Strategy Implications of Research Findings

Teens and young adults ...	PNB Response
... were not engaged by PNB's website	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Make the website more engaging with videos, easier navigation, and a more aesthetically pleasing design
... are unfamiliar with ballet and PNB	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Develop extensive video content to introduce audiences to PNB artists and everyday goings-on in its classes and rehearsals, as well as upcoming repertory
... were not interested by PNB's advertising	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Challenge perceptions of stuffiness by revising the look of advertising and the brand to communicate emotion, immediacy, approachability, and inclusiveness <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▫ Make color scheme more inviting and dynamic ▫ Replace images of dancers in position and distant stage shots with more emotionally engaging images ▫ Include ticket price information
... expect ballet to be boring and stuffy—"not for us"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Create a peer-group event organized around ballet that is casual, social, and interactive <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▫ Continue low-price access programs to communicate (and provide) accessibility ▫ Find ways to welcome young audiences at performances

learning more about PNB repertory, not just the storyline or the music accompaniment, but also stories about the performers and glimpses of behind-the-scenes activities. The research reaffirmed Walker's belief that digital media and streaming video would be extremely useful and powerful tools to show young people what PNB is all about.

THE ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY: FOUR PATHS TO CONNECT WITH YOUNG PEOPLE

With full support from PNB Executive Director David Brown, Walker and her team devised a strategy with four components to tackle the challenges raised in the research (see Table 3). In addition to continuing its low-price ticket programs for teens and young adults, PNB deployed:

1. A redesigned website with easy-to-access information about the company, its artists, its school, and its repertory, as well as more convenient ticket purchasing and other added functionality.

2. A steady stream of videos to help people become more familiar with the company and ballet by showing both PNB dancers (on and off the stage) and students from the PNB School.

3. A revised visual brand identity for both the website and all advertising to convey artistic excellence, while simultaneously making PNB appear more inclusive, inviting, and approachable.

4. Teen Night, an interactive teens-only preview of PNB's annual choreographers showcase that allows teens to engage with the choreographers, dancers, and each other.

ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY COMPONENT NO. 1: REDESIGNING THE WEBSITE

1. OBJECTIVES AND IMPLEMENTATION

Given the extent of the overhaul the website's functionality and design needed, the most sensible option was to rebuild

REDESIGNING THE WEBSITE

PNB engaged an external design and web development firm to carry out both the redesign and the implementation of PNB's website and the development of a new visual brand identity (discussed below, within Component No. 3). PNB staff began meeting both internally and with the design firm in December 2008 to decide on website functionality. As the launch approached, both sides collaborated on creating and testing the underlying site architecture and on developing and uploading new content. At the same time, the web developer integrated the new website with the Tessitura database where PNB had stored information on donors and ticket sales since 2003. Having smooth integration with Tessitura was critical, because the website needed to maintain seamless and uninterrupted ticket-purchasing functionality throughout the redesign. The web design firm's familiarity with Tessitura turned out to be invaluable, allowing it to foresee any idiosyncrasies, make the necessary adjustments, and keep Tessitura up and running.

Although PNB engaged an outside vendor to manage the redesign, the website became such a central component of the organization's audience engagement strategy that several staff were asked to deliberate on most decisions. Team members including Walker, Associate Director of Marketing Lia Chiarelli, plus several additional marketing staff members, as well as managers from the IT and ticket operations departments, all committed time to making sure the site redesign would meet the organization's strategic needs. Walker saw that broad involvement as imperative: "The stakes were just too high," she explains. "We were representing our organization to the rest of the world." Brown and Boal closely followed the implementation of the work and were kept apprised of development milestones.

(continued on next page)

In addition, PNB transitioned a staff person into the newly created role of full-time digital media specialist to manage the redesign process and supervise the focus group research. This position was separate from the part-time (25 hours per week) webmaster, who not only managed the old site but also transferred content to the new site while managing ongoing e-mail campaigns.

Given the scope of the website and its functions, the overhaul was an expensive undertaking. In addition to the significant investment of staff time, PNB invested funds to redesign, re-engineer, and rebuild the website from scratch with new code. These investments fell largely into two buckets:

- The professional fees to cover the scope, design, production, alignment with Tessitura, new code, and upgraded functionality totaled approximately \$270,000.
- Research to inform the design and track the visitor experience added an additional \$100,000. This figure includes the \$50,000 spent on conducting the eight Web and Brand Identity focus groups in 2009, as well as research to measure satisfaction with the website at the benchmark and two follow-up surveys (discussed in the Results section; approximately \$20,000 each for a baseline and two follow-up surveys).

These design and research costs are not ongoing, although a full-time webmaster on staff does manage the website from day to day.

it from the ground up (see sidebar, *Redesigning the Website*). PNB launched its new website in two phases. In July 2009, it unveiled the primary components, focusing on the sections that tended to receive the most traffic: the web pages for individual productions, the PNB School, PNB Giving, and single-ticket sales. PNB

also added some basic embedded video content. One month later, the second phase of the relaunch enhanced existing content and added several new advanced features, including:

- Expanded ticket-buying functionality (described in the next section, “Virtual Multimedia Box Office”)
- Video and image galleries for each performance and for specific fundraising campaigns
- An online calendar that provided a monthly view of upcoming performances and events, with each entry linked to its own web page providing detailed event information
- A link to the real-time traffic report for the area around the theater to help attendees plan how to get to performances
- Additional written content about PNB dancers and choreographers

In addition to having new functionality, the website was designed to be less cluttered and easier to navigate. The organization announced the new website launch via an e-mail sent to all of the 50,000 addresses in its patron database at the time.

2. VIRTUAL MULTIMEDIA BOX OFFICE

PNB funnels most of its marketing activities through the website, driving visitors there through social media sites, e-mail, direct mail, and advertising. Associate Director of Marketing Lia Chiarelli points out that the website functions as a “virtual box office” that’s easy to navigate and delivers greater visual and narrative context for each program in a way that is not possible (or financially feasible) using printed advertisements, brochures, or direct mail. New functionality included:

- A “select your own seat” option allowing ticket

purchasers to see and choose among available seats. Before that functionality was added, many people would call the box office for assistance with seat selection.

- Online subscription purchase
- An automatic “suggested donation” feature in the Shopping Cart

3. WEB ANALYTICS TO OPTIMIZE THE EXPERIENCE

From July 2009 through December 2009 (the six months following the launch of the new website), PNB staff dissected Google Analytics data to understand what was working and what was not, including how visitors got to the site, what they were viewing (and for how long), and where visitors were exiting the site. Based on their analysis, they continually refined site content and navigation with the aim of improving the web experience. They were especially vigilant in terms of identifying any technical glitches and then finding solutions. For example, Google Analytics revealed the important insight that many visitors logged on with mobile devices, then left almost immediately when (presumably) they discovered the website was not optimized for mobile access. PNB remedied the situation by developing a responsive site that displayed well on a variety of devices.

During this time, PNB worked with an additional outside consultant to develop a web analytics monitoring system around a few key metrics that would provide an easily interpreted ongoing status report of how visitors were using the new site. The team continued to optimize functionality and navigability using that system through mid-2010, at which point the major technical glitches appeared to be ironed out and there was no longer a need for the whole team to monitor the analytics so closely.

The web analytics also gave PNB staff a sense of which content visitors found most appealing. They could see which pages attracted the most visitors and where these website users lingered longest. They learned, for example, that there were students all over the country (and throughout the world, in fact) hanging out on school pages and looking at just about every interview with company members. This led PNB to add even more audiovisual content about the PNB School to its website. When PNB began publishing a blog and creating social media content, staffers used this data to help decide which stories and visuals were likely to generate the most enthusiasm.

ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY COMPONENT NO. 2: USING VIDEO TO SHOW MULTIPLE SIDES OF PNB

1. A STEADY STREAM OF VIDEO CONTENT

In late 2008, PNB had begun producing one or two videos per month featuring production excerpts, rehearsal footage, and interviews with Boal, PNB dancers, and choreographers. The videos were posted on YouTube, with links posted on pnb.org. The task of creating videos was originally added to the responsibilities of an existing staff member, but once Walker saw how much interest the videos generated—and remembering the importance that teens and young adults had placed on the videos in focus group sessions—she concluded that video production was too important strategically to be just another responsibility for a marketing team member who might be distracted by other duties. She seized the opportunity to develop

IN-HOUSE VIDEO PRODUCTION

Lindsay Thomas is a one-woman video production unit inside PNB. She develops the content ideas and handles the shooting, lighting, editing, and every other aspect of the production process. It takes her approximately 20 hours to develop a video from start to finish. In her first few years at PNB, she interned for just 15 hours per week (but moved in 2012–2013 to full time). That meant she had to work quickly, while also trying to strike a balance between quality and quantity. “I try to not get too caught up in absolute perfectionism so that I can consistently produce a sufficient quantity of fresh content,” she says.

Thomas develops most of the ideas for video content on her own (although marketing and artistic staff review every video before it is posted). She sources new ideas by making it her job to understand all that is going on in the company and school. She familiarizes herself with upcoming productions, attending season briefings and reviewing archival videos when possible. From there, she relies on her own background in ballet (she grew up as a dedicated ballet student, dancing six days a week, three hours per day) and her intimate knowledge of PNB to identify what might most interest a potential audience member. “Basically, I think what I would want to see as a ballet lover. What would I want to know about the program before I went? And then I try to make it,” she explains.

For example, when the company was performing *Swan Lake*, Thomas knew that PNB Principal Dancer Carrie Imler was exceptional at turning, and she was determined to share evidence of that skill with the public. “I chose to show her doing fouettés in rehearsal,” she explained. “It is a phenomenal feat, and everyone loved them. It was a very popular one-minute video that I just knew would be appealing.” That video has now been viewed over 190,000 times. Thomas’s knowledge of the production and the company paid off.

Through videos like these, Thomas shares her insider’s vantage on what is happening at PNB. As Boal sees it, “She’s captured really well what happens in the studio in a very honest way. It doesn’t look edited or manufactured for the public. It’s just actually what happens.”

For an art form like ballet, where artists are obsessed with perfect position and timing, allowing a videographer to move freely amid studio rehearsals and throughout the school can be highly disconcerting. At first, Thomas noticed that dancers tended to dislike the camera. She had to build a level of trust with them and the artistic staff to make them understand she would not publish any videos that made them look bad. It took time, and Thomas says her insider knowledge of ballet helped, as did giving dancers a chance to review and approve any videos in which they were featured before they went live online. (The dancers rarely request any changes to the videos.)

Thomas emphasizes that since all the videos are produced in-house, start-up costs are minimal. She estimates that the following resources are needed to produce professional-caliber video productions at the level PNB expects:

- A Mac computer with considerable processing power
- A versatile HD video camera with a good zoom and a low-enough aperture to capture high-quality footage in low-light performance settings
- Video editing software such as Final Cut Pro, a standard editing platform. Thomas also uses a program called Motion, but she believes Final Cut can handle most of an organization’s editing needs.
- All told, Thomas believes that an organization can build in-house video production capabilities for less than \$7,500—perhaps \$3,000 to \$4,000 for the computer, \$2,000 to \$3,000 for the camera, and \$500 for the software. As in many other technical fields, the hardware and software used to produce and edit videos change frequently. For organizations, the good news is that such changes often bring new capabilities at a lower price.

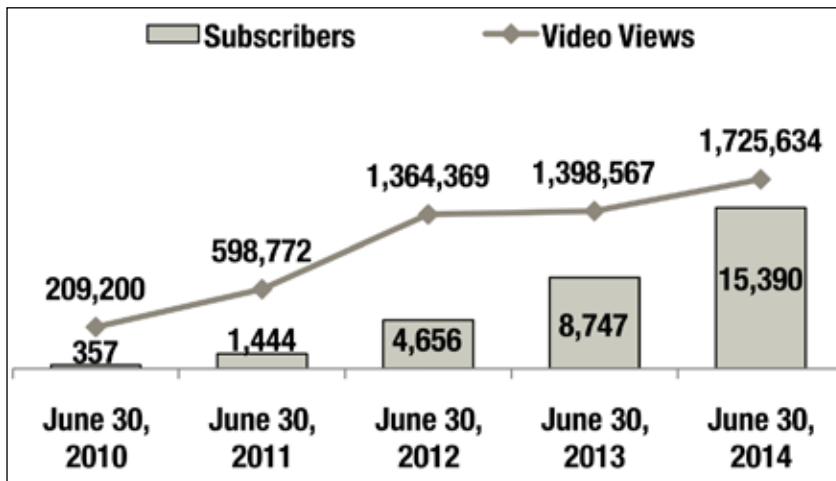
Thomas also notes that a company does not necessarily need the best camera or most powerful computer to get started. Organizations can easily record occasional videos using simple consumer-grade cameras, upload those videos to YouTube, and link them to a website.

a marketing department intern with a love of ballet, Lindsay Thomas, into PNB’s in-house videographer (see sidebar, *In-House Video Production*).

Since 2009, Thomas has released approximately one video per week. In addition to videos of goings-on in the school and rehearsal studios, she generally produces four to five videos to promote each production that are released in the weeks leading up to opening night. These videos often include interviews with dancers and choreographers, archival footage, and rehearsal excerpts.

PNB posts the videos, usually of one to four minutes in length, on its YouTube channel and then inserts links to them into the appropriate sections of pnb.org (e.g., the PNB School section of the site or the webpage of an individual production). Videos are also embedded directly into e-mails and cross-promoted on social media (posting videos directly on Facebook gets twice as many views as just posting a link).

Figure 2. PNB YouTube Subscribers and Video Views



2. THE VIDEOS ARE POPULAR, SOME MORE SO THAN OTHERS

The videos have been a big hit. In the first year of video production (July 2008–June 2009) PNB produced 28 videos, and in subsequent years produced between 50 and 60 per year. By mid-2014, PNB’s YouTube channel had more than 15,000 subscribers with annual video views near two million (as shown in Figure 2). Several videos have surpassed 150,000 views. If that’s not enough, PNB’s website evaluation research (discussed in the Results section) shows that 76 percent of website visitors enjoy watching the videos.

The ability to track online viewership through YouTube analytics—including not just hits on individual videos but also average view duration, shares, and “likes”—has helped PNB to understand what types of videos resonate most strongly with its audiences (see Figure 3 for examples of popular videos). Videos focused on anything to do with Balanchine or the more classic, well-known ballets tend to get more hits and are more likely to be watched in their entirety than others. Videos showing dancers’ athleticism and flexibility are also popular. Finally, video interviews that give dancers a voice—something audiences rarely get to hear—tend to be popular (and seem well aligned with Walker’s desire to help audiences get to know the company). Says Thomas:

Some of our audience members very much feel like they have a relationship with these dancers, especially the principal dancers whom they’ve been watching on stage for so long. So any time there’s a narrative from a particular dancer, especially a well-known principal dancer, that video tends to be very popular.

Figure 3. Examples of Popular Videos

PNB Company Class—Jumping:

This approximately two-minute-long video from November 2011 is the most-viewed PNB video. It captures the athleticism of ballet with footage of male and female dancers in the company practicing a variety of dance jumps.



Pacific Northwest Ballet Summer Course:

Released in December 2008 to promote PNB's 2009 summer course, this approximately five-minute-long video includes interviews with the school directors, administrators, and instructors to give potential students a sense of what they can expect from attending the summer program.



PNB Performs George Balanchine's Jewels:

A nearly two-minute-long video of excerpts from Balanchine's *Jewels*, performed in 2009. The video was uploaded just after the end of the run.



Videos promoting the PNB School summer ballet programs also continue to receive a lot of views. Thomas believes that young dancers view these videos to get a sense of what it would be like to spend a summer with the PNB School and to learn more about what the curriculum offers.

Certain videos are less likely to receive interest and attention. For the most part, videos with a lot of talking-head footage do not generate much excitement—unless of course those heads belong to popular PNB dancers. And despite the fact that PNB fans enjoy sharing their opinions on social media, videos featuring patron reviews (which many arts companies produce) do not have high viewership, so Thomas avoids making them.

Despite her experience and her ongoing monitoring of which types of videos prove to be most popular for other dance companies, Thomas admits it can be hard to predict the success or failure of any individual piece. As she says:

Social media isn't very scientific. Even though we try to look at all those statistics, sometimes you've just got to put something together and say, "Let's see what this does." And sometimes things that you think are going to flop go really well. Sometimes it goes the other way. . . . People want to hire someone to make a viral video. But you can't do that. Viral videos happen on their own. There is no magic formula to create one.

Thomas keeps a close watch on the YouTube subscribers metric, because subscribers are automatically notified when videos are posted, driving up views. About half of YouTube subscribers come from the United States, and 76 percent of U.S. subscribers are ages 13 to 34.

Building up PNB's YouTube subscriber base (also shown

in Figure 2) took time. In the beginning, PNB gained about one new subscriber per week. This slowly increased to a pace of about 25 per week. But in the first six months of 2013, PNB averaged approximately 15 new subscribers per day. Thomas advises organizations not to give up if they don't attract thousands of subscribers right away, and to remain consistent in posting new content even if they see little momentum. Despite the fact that PNB was a well-known brand capable of generating a lot of interest, Thomas says it still took two years for momentum to build. Smaller and lesser-known organizations can also find an audience on YouTube. The Anaheim Ballet, for example, is less well known, but has managed to build a YouTube base of over 90,000 subscribers. Thomas suggests Anaheim Ballet could be reaping the "first mover" benefit: It started to produce and post YouTube ballet videos earlier than most other companies, at a time when there was much less video content of ballet available to watch online.

Thomas believes the consistent frequency that she maintains—producing one or two videos per week—is important to generating momentum and attracting a loyal audience. She learned this lesson the hard way. During her first two years, she had kept up a steady pace of producing one video per week, and subscription numbers rose steadily. When competing commitments at PNB required her to slow down that pace in the spring of 2012, PNB's viewership totals dropped and the pace of acquiring new YouTube subscribers decreased from approximately 15 per day to just 10. Thomas believes that it was the lapse in the consistency of timing of releases, not necessarily the decrease itself, that drove the decline.

ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY COMPONENT NO. 3: INVITING NEW LOOK FOR THE BRAND (IMAGES, COLORS, AND TONE OF VOICE)

PPNB revamped its website and all other communications with a new brand identity—including a logo and a "look and feel" for communications—designed to convey excitement and approachability while expressing the company's aspirations to excel at both contemporary and traditional ballet. The challenge of the redesign was to develop a relevant and contemporary visual identity without pushing visuals in an avant-garde direction that might alienate PNB's traditional audience.

PNB hired the same design firm that had worked on the website overhaul.⁷ To guide the rebranding process, the firm conducted its own research, including interviews with Boal, select dancers, and staff. Walker believes that using an outside firm was a crucial part of developing a new look for the brand. In addition to bringing technical expertise and branding experience, having an outside perspective also helped PNB staff respond objectively rather than emotionally to some of the critiques from focus group participants who had perceived unintentionally elitist or exclusionary messages in the old marketing materials. The design firm helped PNB figure out how to address those criticisms and communicate broader inclusivity without compromising PNB's identity as an institution.

PNB revised four elements of its printed and online communications:

7. The consultant fees for developing the visual identity were approximately \$40,000. This work was also informed by the four 2010 Advertising and Promotions focus groups discussed earlier, which had an additional budget of \$30,000, slightly more per group than the Web and Brand Identity focus groups, in part due to economies of scale.

1. Color scheme. The design team presented several visual concepts for the color scheme. A team of top PNB managers and staff weighed the options and gravitated toward a color scheme that they felt best reflected the company's work. The blacks, reds, and browns were replaced by a white background against which PNB would use blue (a color that figured prominently in a number of the Balanchine ballets and in PNB's own *Nutcracker*), alongside complementary purples and reds. The newer advertising also employed a brighter text with a contrasting color scheme to attract attention. That text often includes the pricing information that young audiences said they want to see (e.g., *Tickets start at \$25! or Up to 40% discount on tickets!*).

2. Logo. To give communications a cleaner, lighter, and more fluid look, the PNB logo was revamped to be visually striking and more noticeable both online and in print. Fonts that had been panned in the focus groups were replaced with Helvetica and Garamond.

3. Images for PNB's website, brochures, and other communications. Distant shots of on-stage performances and images of dancers holding poses that focus group participants called awkward were dropped in favor of close-up photos of PNB dancers showing intense emotional expressions or gazing directly at the viewer. The goal of these photos was to create a sense of excitement and intimacy while connecting with the audience and breaking down the perceptions heard in focus groups of ballet being stuffy or elitist. Walker summarizes the change this way: "Originally, we thought we had to show the grandeur of the art form. No you don't! You have to show somebody with an expression on their face that somebody else can hook into." Some images may have a sense of humor behind them, but they are never irreverent. The homepage of the new website provides a telling example of how the organization uses emotional images

presented via a modern interface that is classic without being stodgy. The impact of this new brand look can be seen by comparing advertising that features the original and new brand look, in Figure 4 and Colorplates 2 and 3. It can also be seen by comparing the post-launch website, shown in Figure 5 and Colorplate 4, with the old version of the site shown earlier in Figure 1 and Colorplate 1.

**“ORIGINALLY, WE
THOUGHT WE HAD TO
SHOW THE GRANDEUR
OF THE ART FORM. NO
YOU DON'T! YOU HAVE
TO SHOW SOMEBODY
WITH AN EXPRESSION
ON THEIR FACE THAT
SOMEBODY ELSE CAN
HOOK INTO.”**

4. Language. Finally, PNB made an explicit effort to use language on the website and in the brochures that was accessible to audiences with varying levels of ballet knowledge and experience. Explains Walker:

We really heard in the focus groups that people didn't feel smart when they looked at our website or some of our collateral, and thought, perhaps, that we were addressing our work to a group of insiders. They'd say: "I don't understand what Balanchine meant," and we weren't doing enough to convey to them that it doesn't matter whether you understand the choreographer's intention or not. So we just try to break down those misperceptions as effectively as we can and let people know that you don't need any special insider knowledge to attend and enjoy a ballet performance.

Figure 4. Advertising with Original and New Brand Look



Figure 5. pnb.org Homepage, Fall 2009



ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY COMPONENT NO. 4: TEEN NIGHT

Knowing that research shows that arts participation in childhood predicts arts participation in adulthood,⁸ PNB staff believe it is especially important to expose teenagers to ballet, and that doing so can prevent them from falling prey to stereotyped perceptions that could keep them away in the future. Although not originally a part of its plan for attracting teen audience members, when PNB heard in focus groups that teens might be receptive to a ballet-related peer-group activity, PNB's Marketing and Media Relations Associate Judith Austin worked with Nicholas Ade, the former principal of PNB's East-side School, to create Teen Night.

The first program at PNB just for teens, Teen Night gave teenagers a preview of PNB's annual Next Step showcase featuring the work of new choreographers drawn from among the company's own dancers. There were two key differences between Teen Night and a typical PNB performance: First, Teen Night was open only to audience members ages 13 to 19. Second, instead of being performed on the company's main stage (capacity 2,890), Teen Night took place in a rehearsal studio having the same dimensions as the main stage but a seating capacity of less than 200. The event generated such interest among teens that PNB oversold the inaugural event in 2011, attracting an audience of 195 teenagers. Ade explains the success of Teen Night by saying it gave teens a sense they were part of something new, innovative, and exclusively for them.

Teen Night, like Next Step, usually consists of six or seven

8. For example, Anni Oskala, Emily Keaney, Tak Wing Chan, and Catherine Bunting, *Encourage Children Today to Build Audiences for Tomorrow* (London: Arts Council England, 2009).



Figure 6. PNB Soloist Kiyon Gaines Discusses the Piece He Choreographed with the Teen Night Audience

Photo by Rex Tranter; Courtesy of Pacific Northwest Ballet, Seattle

short pieces by PNB professional dancers choreographed on dancers from PNB School’s professional division. Many of those dancers are teens themselves, so they are performing for their peers. This setting creates a comfortable environment for the audience to ask questions and learn more about the performances, the dancers, ballet, and PNB. It also gives them an opportunity to socialize with other teens. That happens in a pre-show reception where the teens enjoy refreshments and young staff members pose unintimidating questions to the group to break the ice (e.g., “What’s on your iPod?” and “What other art forms do you attend?”). After the performance, the choreographers answer audience questions.

The capacity in the rehearsal studio was reduced in 2011 at the dancers’ request, so subsequent Teen Night events could not host as large an audience as in that first year. Nonetheless, PNB

held another Teen Night in 2012 that attracted 151 teens, and the 2013 Teen Night brought in 138 teenagers. PNB staff estimate that approximately 75 percent of Teen Night participants are PNB School students, many of whom view Teen Night as an opportunity to introduce their non-dance friends to the environment in which they spend so much of their time.

PNB promotes Teen Night online by posting messages in its social media spaces and via e-mails to past Teen Night attendees and current TeenTix members (through TeenTix). PNB also distributes flyers to a variety of public and private high schools, universities, and local dance and arts centers. To attract teens’ attention, e-mails, social media posts, locker-size posters, and flyers advertising Teen Night include non-traditional images (such as a dancer leaping over a mountaintop; see Figure 7). Moreover, only teen dancers are featured in the advertising, so that the teens see people like themselves.

Figure 7. Teen Night E-mail Advertisement

Photo by Isaac Aoki; Courtesy of Pacific Northwest Ballet, Seattle



WELCOMING TEENS AND YOUNG ADULTS AT PERFORMANCES

The welcome for teens and young adults does not end online and in advertising. While staff strive to make all patrons feel valued, the company makes a special effort to welcome teens and young adults, some of whom could be first-time patrons unsure of whether they will feel at home in a ballet performance hall. Reflecting on what he heard in the focus groups, Boal says:

Younger audiences want to know that they're welcome. We talk to our ushers, our house manager, and all of our staff about being there to greet them and make them feel that they are important patrons of the ballet. Even if they only spent \$5 or \$12.50 to get in, we value the fact that they're there.

Boal plays an active role in welcoming patrons, regularly attending all PNB events and conducting Q&A sessions following every performance. Boal's presence is especially pronounced at PNB's low-cost "gateway" experiences, reflecting the importance he gives new audiences. He introduces the Friday Rehearsal Previews and provides introductory comments for each excerpt. Every PNB production also has one performance designated as part of Backstage Pass (now called "Young Patrons Circle"), PNB's social program designed to cultivate patrons and future donors among 21- to 39-year-olds. That performance features

a reception at intermission just for Backstage Pass members. Boal hosts the reception where the Backstage Pass members can mingle with one another while enjoying complimentary wine. Boal also attends Teen Night and opens the event with a brief introduction.

TeenTix buyers tend to be spread throughout the hall during nearly all performances, unlike the 25 & Under program tickets that are in the front of the second tier.⁹ This arrangement has the potential to lead to uncomfortable situations for both teens and older ballet patrons. In the focus groups, teens said they might not feel comfortable sitting amid groups of older adults. And some adult patrons may be surprised to find groups of teens sitting next to them in "exclusive" seating. After hearing from TeenTix staff that some teen visitors had been questioned about how it was they were sitting in seats usually held by long-term subscribers, PNB decided to head off any possible tension by establishing a tradition of placing announcements in its performance programs (see Figure 8) explaining TeenTix and showing how much the company values its teenage audience members. Teens showed their appreciation for this gesture on a February 2012 TeenTix blog entry declaring, "PNB, we love you madly!"¹⁰ What's more, each PNB show is reviewed by a TeenTix reviewer, and PNB gives these reviewers the same privileges other press members receive, including full access to the pressroom prior to performances.

The welcome continues after the performance, when all audience members for whom PNB has contact information (not just teens and young adults) get an e-mail from PNB that asks

9. Box office staff members give teens their choice of remaining seats for these day-of-show purchases. The box office will also work with teens who want to sit with or near someone who already has tickets.

10. Available at <http://www.teentix.org/blog/how-awesome-is-pnb>.

what they thought of the performance. PNB posts any replies on a Feedback tab for that program's page on the website. That includes all commentary—positive, negative, and indifferent—with the exception of anything particularly hurtful to a dancer or another individual. The objective here is to encourage dialogue and to let all comers—including teens and young adults—know that PNB values their opinions and recognizes their perspectives as valid and legitimate.

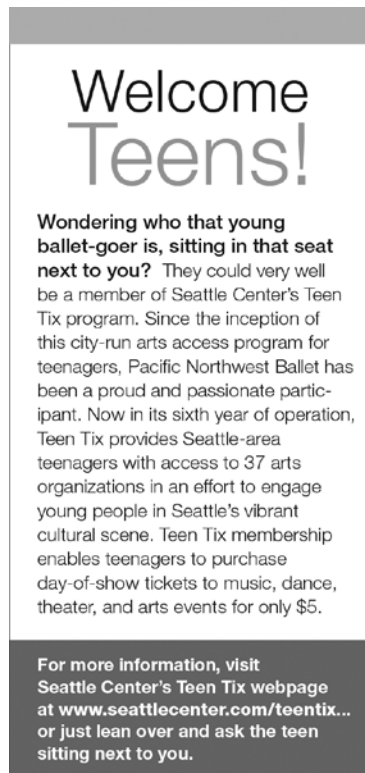


Figure 8. Program Announcement Welcoming Teens

GETTING THE WORD OUT

1. SOCIAL MEDIA CULTIVATES INTEREST AND MORE

Social media is an important channel for building interest in dance and in the company. It is not primarily seen as a way to generate short-term demand. As Chiarelli says:

The direct calls to action don't give us the same kind of results as just showing something beautiful or taking something that everybody's heard about in the ballet world and tying it into something we're doing at PNB. . . . Most of our Facebook fans are located outside the Seattle region, so I can't only talk about ticket promotions, because a lot of those people may not be able to take advantage of those offers. So we use social media to engage people through the actual programming here on our stage. We use it to share things that we think our audience would find interesting that are happening in the ballet world at large. And we use social media to show beautiful, uplifting images of dance. At the end of the day, that's what it's all about. It makes you feel good to watch dance.

Austin puts it this way: "To me, this is about starting a movement—similar to a political campaign, but our candidate is dance. . . . We need young people to feel we're talking to them and have something of value to offer."

PNB invites fans to interact or view content via daily tweets and Facebook links to stories, reviews, information about ballet, photographs, and videos. That requires staff time, with both Austin and Chiarelli dedicating a significant amount of time to generating ongoing content to maintain momentum. Austin explains, “We quickly learned that social media isn’t free. In fact, creating a steady stream of high-quality content and engaging in those conversations take several people, nonstop content, and lots of time.”

Although sales are not the main objective, some tweets and posts are linked to discounted ticket offers. PNB also encourages ongoing interaction with users, often in a lighthearted way, to connect them to the company and to the programming on stage. For example, in the days leading up to the opening night of *Swan Lake* during the 2012–2013 season, PNB invited people through social media announcements to submit videos of their best “swan arms” that the company would use to create a video montage. PNB received dozens of submissions.¹¹

Growth in Facebook activity around PNB has been exponential. As shown in Figure 9, PNB had just over 2,000 Facebook fans (“likes”) approximately one year after first joining Facebook in late July 2008. Less than five years later, the organization’s Facebook fan base had climbed to over 90,000. Just as the organization’s YouTube following extends beyond Seattle, only 25 percent of PNB’s Facebook fans are from the Seattle area. More than half (61 percent) of its Facebook fans are teens and young adults ages 13 to 35.

Interaction metrics from Facebook such as monthly active users and “28 Days People Talking About This” indicate that PNB’s Facebook fans are not only “liking” the PNB Facebook page, but about one in three of them also interacts with content

11. The resulting montage is viewable at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sQsOifSKt1g>.

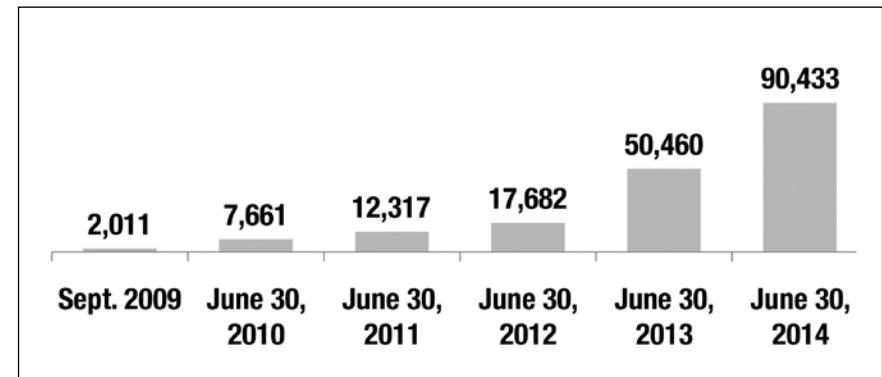


Figure 9. Facebook Lifetime Total “Likes”

on the page each month, by, for example, liking, commenting on, or sharing a page post or mentioning PNB’s Facebook activity in their own posts.

Visitors who arrive on the PNB website via Facebook or Twitter often go on to view other content regarding an upcoming production or a PNB dancer, which can lead to a ticket purchase. PNB may be using a soft-sell approach in social media, but that approach still drives website traffic and revenue. In 2012 alone, Facebook brought 28,672 visitors to pnb.org, leading to 389 transactions that generated revenue of \$47,636. Twitter brought 4,140 visitors to the site, resulting in 80 transactions and \$15,559 in revenue.

2. ADVERTISING TO TEENS AND YOUNG ADULTS

With the exception of advertisements for Student Rush tickets in local university papers, PNB has little paid advertising directed solely at teens and young adults.¹² Instead,

12. PNB uses several traditional and new media channels to promote the season and individual productions, including print, outdoor advertising, direct mail, e-mail, and social media. TV and radio are also used for repertory with broad appeal, such as *Nutcracker* and *Swan Lake*.

RESULTS

1. THE REDESIGNED WEBSITE IS EASIER TO NAVIGATE AND SUPPORTS THE BRAND

PNB conducted a series of website visitor surveys—separate from the research discussed earlier—to track improvements in the online experience. During a three-week period in June 2009, before the launch of the new website, visitors to pnb.org received an invitation to complete a benchmark survey about their visit. To ensure the benchmark data included a large sample of 13- to 35-year-olds, PNB also sent e-mail invitations to patrons of its teen and young adult programs (the final sample included 207 teens and young adults under age 35, and 275 respondents ages 36 and older). The benchmark data (see Table 4, below) confirmed what PNB had heard from its earlier focus groups: The website did an adequate job of providing information, but was neither fun to browse nor eye-catching. The research also confirmed that visitors to the website did not like the existing ticket-purchase process and found the multimedia features disappointing.

The survey was repeated in 2010 and again in 2012 to track improvements.¹³ For each survey, the data collection was split over two periods in midwinter and early spring to capture seasonal variation and to collect data during the run of at least one contemporary and one traditional program. As the results in Table 4 show, the 2010 and 2012 survey respondents reported that their visits to the redesigned website were more satisfying.

13. As in the benchmark, approximately 40 percent of the sample was comprised of teens and young adults ages 35 and under. The 2010 survey included 487 teens and young adults and 783 respondents ages 36 and above; 2012 survey respondents included 408 teens and young adults and 678 respondents ages 36 and above.

the company relies on e-mail and direct mail, in addition to social media. To help messages targeted to teens and young adults stand out, PNB often uses images that are slightly different from those used in other promotions for a given production.

According to Austin, the most effective promotion has been direct mail followed by at least one e-mail containing an offer and one or two image-based social media posts, a formula PNB follows for each program with its 25 & Under patrons. One challenge, however, has been determining which patrons to target with what age-specific offer. Although PNB had verified date of birth when patrons purchased tickets for age-specific promotions such as 25 & Under, it has only recently begun capturing that information by requiring them to complete an information card that includes birth year. Without that data, PNB previously had to try to infer birth year from past responses to age-specific promotions. As of mid-2013, PNB has birth-year information for over 55,000 of the approximately 250,000 active patron accounts, which is not only helping the company target current age-specific promotions more accurately, but will also allow PNB to guide patrons seamlessly from one age-specific program to the next as they get older.

As for teens, PNB also communicates with them directly through TeenTix. Events at PNB (and other TeenTix organizations) are featured in a weekly newsletter that the TeenTix organization e-mails to its members, as well as an event calendar on the TeenTix website (TeenTix.org) and posts by TeenTix staff on Twitter and Facebook. In addition, teen-authored reviews of each PNB production get posted on the TeenTix blog (<http://www.teentix.org/blog>).

Table 4. Website Evaluation Before and After July 2009 Launch

	Baseline (June 2009) n=433-482	First Evaluation (2010) n=948-1,252	Second Evaluation (2012) n=823-1,057
Overall satisfaction with PNB website*	56%	63%^	64%^
Satisfaction with elements of PNB website*			
Clarity of the language	67%	69%	70%
General information	66%	68%	69%
Information on performances/events	65%	70%	70%
Ease of navigation	53%	60%^	59%
Design and layout	50%	60%^	61%^
Ticket purchase process	46%	57%^	56%^
Multimedia features (videos, podcasts, etc.)	39%	52%^	64%
Perceptions of PNB website**			
Fits with my impressions of PNB	53%	57%	71%
Was easy to find what I was looking for	52%	56%	64%
Pictures on the website offer a good idea of what to expect from PNB	48%	56%^	70%
I am impressed by the overall look of the website	48%	57%^	68%
Has a genuine and down-to-earth feel to it	39%	40%	54%
Is fun to browse	38%	42%	54%
Is eye-catching	35%	45%^	54%
Looks innovative and cutting-edge	30%	43%^	50%
I find new information and things to do every time I visit	26%	32%^	44%
Perceptions of Pacific Northwest Ballet**			
Provides innovative and cutting-edge dance performances	68%	66%	76%
Provides a warm and inviting atmosphere, even to newcomers	58%	57%	66%

Bolded percentages are significantly higher than both other statistics in the row at 95% confidence

^ Indicates that the percentage is significantly higher than the lowest statistic in the row

* Answering 6 or 7 on scale of 1 “Not at all satisfied” to 7 “Very satisfied”

** Answering 6 or 7 on scale of 1 “Disagree strongly” to 7 “Agree strongly”

The new website was not only easier to navigate, but also supported the company’s brand objectives. The site was seen as having a more “down-to-earth” feel, even as it looked innovative and cutting-edge. Importantly, visitors reported they had more fun browsing the site (results discussed in the next section

suggest that they did in fact spend more time on the new site), found the design more eye-catching, and learned new information each time they visited—three elements likely to encourage return visits. While just 39 percent of visitors in the benchmark survey reported being satisfied with the site’s multimedia features, that number jumped to 64 percent three years later. Growing majorities of website visitors said the site fit with their impressions of PNB, and that the pictures on the website offered a good idea of what to expect from PNB. In general, these improvements were seen across teen and young adult (ages 13 to 35) website visitors, as well as older (ages 36+) website visitors.

2. MORE ONLINE ACTIVITY, AND ONLINE TICKET SALES AND DONATIONS INCREASE

PNB’s website is attracting more visitors and they are staying longer to visit more pages. As shown in Table 5, the annual number of unique visitors to pnb.org increased by over 50 percent, from 307,000 (July 2008 to June 2009) to nearly 470,000 (July 2012 to June 2013). In comparison with the baseline year, the data show that each unique visitor now finds the website “stickier,” staying to visit more pages.

Aproximately 60 percent of all PNB single tickets are now bought on pnb.org. Most of the rest are sold through PNB’s box office either via phone or in person. Just 1 percent of single

Table 5. Visits to pnb.org

	Baseline 2008- 2009	Year 1 7/1/09- 6/30/10	Year 2 7/1/10- 6/30/11	Year 3 7/1/11- 6/30/12	Year 4 7/1/12- 6/30/13
Total Visits	592,262	622,976	675,987	720,238	862,975
Unique Web Visitors	307,565	334,533	365,700	399,043	469,100
Pages per Visit	4.5	6.0	6.1	5.4	5.5

tickets are sold through third-party suppliers, including Ticketmaster, which had sold approximately 5 percent of tickets just before the new website was launched (PNB passes on the savings to ticket buyers). Moreover, the new “suggested donation” feature is driving revenue. In 2009–2010 alone, 1,060 single-ticket transactions included \$20,268 in donations, a 10-fold increase from the prior year, when the feature did not exist. In 2010–2011, that figure nearly doubled, as 1,368 single-ticket transactions included \$39,417 in donations. In 2011–2012 and 2012–2013, single-ticket transactions totaled 1,293 and 1,569, respectively, and included donations totaling \$27,198 and \$41,419, respectively.

3. MORE TEENS AND YOUNG ADULTS VISIT THE BALLET

The response to the age-specific promotions has been positive—although not equally so among all age groups. As shown in Table 6, attendance at main stage productions has remained largely steady since the 2008–2009 season (PNB attributes the drop in attendance in the 2011–2012 season to repeating a run of the prior season’s *Coppélia*).¹⁴

Table 7 shows the response to PNB’s age-specific promotions, with the areas of greatest growth in the first two rows.¹⁵ TeenTix grew the most, with members buying twice as many

14. For approximately the same period covered in the table, total ballet attendance was down 10 percent nationally. The total number of attendances declined, from 10.6 million in 2008 (6.6 million Americans who attended an average of 1.60 performances each) to 9.6 million in 2012 (6.3 million Americans who attended on average 1.52 performances each). See National Endowment for the Arts, *2012 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts*, October 2014 revision (Washington, D.C.: National Endowment for the Arts, 2014), *2008 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts* (Washington, D.C.: National Endowment for the Arts, 2009), and *Survey of Public Participation in the Arts: Raw Aggregate SPSS Data File 1982–2012*, http://arts.gov/sites/default/files/sppa1982-2012_spss.sav_.zip.

15. The numbers reported by the box office do not include tickets purchased for younger people by their parents, other older relatives, or friends; therefore, teen and young adult attendance is likely higher than these numbers indicate.

Table 6. Ticket Sales

	Baseline 2008–2009	Year 1 2009–2010	Year 2 2010–2011	Year 3 2011–2012	Year 4 2012–2013
Total main stage tickets	165,994	168,976	169,383	159,762	167,226
Single tickets	123,114	127,282	128,028	120,011	124,828
Subscription tickets	42,880	41,694	41,355	39,751	42,398

Table 7. Response to Teen- and Young Adult-Targeted Promotions

	Baseline 2008–2009	Year 1 2009–2010	Year 2 2010–2011	Year 3 2011–2012	Year 4 2012–2013
Single Tickets					
TeenTix	869	1,279	1,491	1,434	2,075 [238% over baseline]
25 & Under	1,595	2,345	1,811	1,667	1,908 [20% over baseline]
Student Rush	751	623	643	576	793
Teen Night	N/A*	N/A*	195	151	138
Subscriptions					
Backstage Pass	142	115	107	108	77
Student subscriptions	100	99	36	63	43
Repeat teen & young adult visitors (2 or more visits, including subscriptions)	516	755	794	819	814

* Teen Night was first held in Year 2

tickets in the 2012–2013 season as they did in 2008–2009. The momentum with that group continues to build. PNB’s run of *Roméo et Juliette* during the 2012–2103 season sold 500 TeenTix tickets, the most tickets that TeenTix had ever sold to any event. In 2012, PNB won four of the “Teen Awards” that TeenTix hands out to honor Seattle member organizations, including

Best Selling Show. PNB was similarly honored at the end of the 2010–2011 season with Teen Awards in several categories, including Favorite Organization (for the second year in a row), Best Dance Performance for *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, and Best Box Office Experience. Since TeenTix began handing out its Teen Awards in 2009, PNB has been a consistent winner in several of the major categories. (The caveat here is that PNB is also among the largest organizations taking part in TeenTix, so some of its popularity may be driven by its size and prestige in Seattle.)

Ticket sales through the 25 & Under program (to audience members under age 26) have risen, with a net increase of 20 percent since the baseline. Sales of 25 & Under tickets spiked in the 2009–2010 season, when the program was expanded briefly in midseason to include not only the two Friday evening performances of each production, but also both Thursday performances of the run. By early 2010, the promotion was available for four out of the nine performances in a typical PNB production schedule, up from two in prior seasons.

In fall 2010, PNB shortened its typical production run by one performance, losing a Thursday performance and making Friday the opening night. From that point on, PNB offered 25 & Under for the Friday opening, the second Friday performance, and the sole Thursday performance for a total of three performances in each eight-performance run. Also during that year, promotions for 25 & Under were cut back to e-mail only, as opposed to e-mail plus direct mail, producing another hit to program sales for the 2010–2011 season (direct mail was resumed the following season).

The 25 & Under program does face one continuing obstacle that may limit its success: Although young adults overwhelmingly prefer to purchase their tickets online, they cannot buy 25

& Under tickets over the Internet. In order to demonstrate their eligibility for the 25 & Under promotion, the ticket buyers must present a photo ID showing that they meet the age requirement. They can purchase their tickets over the phone, but they still need to present a photo ID when they pick up those tickets at the box office.

4. REPEAT ATTENDANCE IS UP, BUT SUBSCRIPTIONS HAVE STALLED

Selling season subscriptions to young adults is a challenge for many performing arts organizations, including PNB. As shown in Table 7, membership in Backstage Pass has fluctuated around 100, with little movement over recent years and a dip during the 2012–2013 season. Subscription sales to students have also been soft. They were never high, but at 43 subscriptions in 2012–2013, they are at less than half of what they were at the beginning of the initiative. This has not, however, been an area that PNB has placed heavy marketing behind, and the staff knows too that these student buyers have gravitated toward other offers (e.g., 25 & Under).

The number of teen and young adult visitors who made two or more visits per season has, however, increased by over 60 percent, as shown in the bottom line of Table 7, suggesting that PNB is doing more than just getting one-time visitors, it is building a following.

KEYS TO SUCCESS

PNB has extended a multifaceted welcome to teens and young adults by offering accessible ticket prices, providing diverse opportunities to get to know the company through its website and social media, and presenting a more approachable and accessible image in its advertising. The company seems to have found the right mix. Large numbers of teens and young adults have responded by attending performances, watching videos, and engaging with the company online. Significantly, the organization has sparked a conversation with young people, who are now talking about PNB with peers on platforms like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and the TeenTix blog.

At the same time, the success has been somewhat uneven, with gains in attendance among teens and those in their early 20s and hardly any movement above that age group. That may be a question of focus: The organization has expended considerable time and resources to target and tailor its marketing toward encouraging attendance by teens and audience members under 25 years old. Although there is a reduced-price-ticket program accessible to older young adults (Backstage Pass, for patrons ages 21 to 39), it has not benefited from a similar marketing push. As discussed later (in the “Moving Forward” section), PNB is working to remedy that discrepancy.

The lack of momentum with those in their late 20s and 30s should not dampen enthusiasm for the success PNB has had bringing teens and those in their early 20s to the ballet, with many returning for multiple visits each season. PNB achieved

such success by first getting to know its target audience using observation and research. Then PNB used what it had learned to address attendance barriers and build interest. Importantly, PNB's strategy focused on correcting what the company saw as misperceptions.¹⁶ The artistic product itself did not change—even the new Teen Night was a reframing of an existing program. Several elements of the strategy seem to have had a major impact:

1. PNB SHOWS TEENS AND YOUNG ADULTS THAT THEY BELONG THERE

The company has done more than just provide opportunities for young audiences; it has taken several steps to show them that they belong at PNB and created several gateways that address the multiple barriers to teen and young adult participation:

1. Access. First, PNB enables access via low ticket prices. Teens and young adults believe ballet will be expensive, and while PNB's research suggested teens are willing to pay to see things they like, they are not familiar enough with the art form to take that risk. Lower prices mitigate that problem and encourage these young people to give ballet a try. While PNB staff believe price is less of a barrier than it is often made out to be, they also believe that low ticket

16. PNB's experience aligns with a comprehensive analysis of audience-building programs and literature that suggests organizations can attract disinclined audiences by understanding and then targeting perceptual barriers. See Kevin P. McCarthy and Kimberly Jinnett, *A New Framework for Building Participation in the Arts* (Santa Monica, Calif: RAND Corp., 2001), <http://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/audience-development-for-the-arts/key-research/Documents/New-Framework-for-Building-Participation-in-the-Arts.pdf>.

prices send a strong signal that ballet is for everyone—that it's not an arcane art form for a select few.

2. Communications. To counteract perceptions and expectations heard in focus groups that PNB and ballet itself would be stuffy, elitist, and unwelcoming, PNB ensures that teens and those eligible for the 25 & Under program hear a constant drumbeat that they belong at PNB. The TeenTix

program may play an especially important role in building that sense among the teenage audience. TeenTix does more than just offer access to discounted tickets. It hosts a broader online community where teens can read reviews of PNB productions written by other teens tipping them off to shows they might like, much like reviewers on sites like Amazon.com or Tripadvisor.com give trusted guidance to their fellow shoppers and travelers. The fact that the reviews are written by fellow teenagers sends a strong signal to teens who visit the blog that ballet can be for people like them.¹⁷ PNB also markets heavily to audience members ages 25 and under with e-mail and direct mail promoting the 25 & Under ticket program for each production. Those promotions often have a different look and feel than PNB's traditional advertising and are designed to appeal to their age group. The message for young people is clear and

**PNB STAFF
MEMBERS BELIEVE
PRICE IS LESS OF
A BARRIER THAN
IT IS OFTEN MADE
OUT TO BE.**

17. Social psychologists have long recognized that people gravitate toward situations in which they think they will find others like themselves, e.g., Paula M. Niedenthal, Nancy Cantor, & John F. Kihlstrom, "Prototype Matching: A Strategy for Social Decision Making," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 48 (1985), 575–584.

unwavering: PNB wants them there. For those who are “graduating” from TeenTix into 25 & Under (i.e., when they turn 20), this message is likely highly credible.

3. At the Performance Hall. The welcome that young audiences are given at PNB performances is also designed to let them know unequivocally that they belong there. Boal sees all these welcoming initiatives as the antidote to those perceptions of elitism PNB heard in focus groups. He and Walker take this cause to heart, with a conviction that they need to earn the attendance of the audience by doing everything possible to make PNB welcoming and inclusive. Says Walker:

I want anybody—whether a 9-year-old, a 90-year-old, or a 60-year-old—to feel comfortable, welcome, and appreciated from their first interaction, whether that’s on the website or over the phone or at the ticket office window, to the moment they exit the theater. Ballet is not on anybody’s must-have-to-live list. This is not groceries or heating oil. This is a discretionary activity.

In explaining PNB’s popularity among teens who participate in the TeenTix program, Holly Arsenault, the executive director of TeenTix, acknowledges that some of that popularity is likely due to the fact that PNB performs in a large, prestigious venue where teens are more likely to be able to obtain TeenTix tickets. But she says the real key to PNB’s popularity with the teen demographic stems from the way it embraces them as valued audience members. She explains:

I am certain that the “X” factor with PNB is they have

a commitment to young audiences that permeates their institutional culture at every level. I’ve heard Peter Boal say that he has personally gone to his ushers and asked them to take good care of any teens they see. This is the act of an executive who is not just paying lip service to the value of young audience development. He gets it, and so does his staff. If I could get every TeenTix partner organization to empower its front-of-house staff the way PNB does, to help them understand the crucial role that they play in welcoming young audiences, we would see a sea change in teen arts engagement.

Even though Teen Night occurs only once per year, having a performance exclusively for teenagers sends yet another signal to teens that they belong at PNB. Boal, who attends Teen Night and opens the event with a brief introduction, sees it as an important way to build relevance with younger audiences by giving them a chance to connect with choreographers and dancers close to their own age. He says:

Our Next Step choreographers are an average age of 21. I’ll speak to the teenagers and there’s a little [lack of interest]. And then the 21-year-old gets up, and everybody is sitting up and it’s like, “Oh yes, I speak your language, not the old guy’s language.” The choreographers explain their pieces, and I think that goes a long way toward educating these younger audiences. I think they can really relate to that.

PNB is making inroads into changing teen and young adult perceptions that attending a ballet would be uncomfortable.

According to PNB's most recent website evaluation (2012), 66 percent of teens and young adults say that PNB provides a warm and inviting atmosphere, even for newcomers. That's an improvement from the 59 percent who felt that way when website visitors were first surveyed in the 2009 baseline evaluation.

2. PNB IS HELPING AUDIENCES BECOME FAMILIAR WITH THE COMPANY AND BALLET

PNB's low levels of awareness and familiarity among teen and young adult cohorts were important obstacles to overcome, because young audiences typically only attend performances when they know something about the work or the performers.¹⁸

In response, PNB has made it easier to get to know the company's work, artists, and art form. PNB uses videos, images, and narratives to show not just what happens on its stages, but also the day-to-day activities of its dancers, students, and choreographers.

The website evaluation research indicates that this content effectively conveys to site visitors a good idea of what to expect at PNB. PNB recognizes that building this comfort level takes time and continuous reinforcement—hence the

steady stream of new content and the ongoing efforts to engage audiences through social media. Speaking of the teen and young adult audience, Boal states, "They're not necessarily a big ticket-buying audience yet, but they are gaining an education in ballet through our social media efforts. They're coming to us all the

18. This is true of adults as well, of course. Performing arts companies across diverse art forms know that familiar repertoire typically attracts the largest audiences.

time." The social media interaction metrics that PNB has collected support Boal's enthusiastic statements.

PNB has noticed that familiarity can help ticket sales. Contrary to an initial belief among PNB staff that younger audiences were likely to be motivated primarily by edgy contemporary works, PNB ticket sales data showed that teens and young adults buy two to three times more tickets to full-length works such as *Cinderella* and *Roméo et Juliette* than to contemporary mixed repertoires. Teens and young adults also make up a larger percentage of the total audience (although still a minority) for traditional as opposed to contemporary programming. Boal believes these preferences stem from familiarity with the storylines of some classic ballets. As he says:

The surprise to me was that for those teens who do attend the ballet, often their favorite performance of the year is Swan Lake or Sleeping Beauty. I would think it would be new works. But they love the traditional, which bodes well for our profession. [They'd say] "Swan Lake is safe; I've heard of it, I saw the movie."

Arsenault of TeenTix says these results line up with her extensive experience: For their first forays into an art form, teens gravitate toward traditional, familiar work. She says:

Adults tend to assume that teens are only interested in contemporary work, mixed media, etc. But, in reality, teens—especially younger teens—are quite conservative in their tastes. People who are just starting to experiment with arts attendance tend to want to have their expectations confirmed before they start to venture out and try newer, "weirder" stuff. Also, we talk about teens' "intimidation factors" surrounding arts attendance a lot. One of

the big ones is that they won't "get" it, won't know what to say about it to their friends afterward, etc. So, in the case of dance, at least if it's a story ballet, then there's some kind of narrative to follow. And if it's a narrative that you already have some familiarity with—like, say, Romeo & Juliet—so much the better.

3. AN UPDATED VISUAL BRAND IDENTITY CREATES INTEREST AND EXCITEMENT

PPNB reimagined and redesigned the imagery, visuals, and language it uses online and in other communications channels to convey that the art form is exciting and to communicate greater approachability and inclusivity. PNB could have just inserted its new video content and images into its previous website and advertising templates, but Walker believes teens and young adults would never have made it past the old homepage or paid attention to advertising that continued with the same look and feel as before. It is not possible to know for certain whether or not that assumption is true, but many brand and marketing strategists believe that graphic design and visuals play an important role in attracting attention and building brand perceptions. The focus groups did show that the existing website was not drawing in teens and young adults, who panned its “muted” colors, found the content unexciting, and thought even the fonts were “boring.” They did not want to read on.

In contrast, increasing numbers of website visitors now say they are impressed by the overall look and feel of the website. They describe the design as eye-catching, and think PNB is doing a good job of appearing genuine and down-to-earth while simultaneously conveying a sense that the company is innovative and cutting-edge. Website visitors of all ages have reported greater satisfaction with the new site, but the improvements have been

especially important in helping PNB appeal to the young adults who are most likely to engage with organizations online.

Organizations often neglect to consider the overall image portrayed in their communications, and instead focus on advertising program-by-program or season-by-season to build demand. Institutional marketing around an overall brand can yield results that transcend any individual production or even a single season, helping to build audience excitement and enthusiasm about an organization over the long term.¹⁹

4. MARKETING IS IN STEP WITH THE ARTISTIC VISION

Perhaps most importantly, Walker's team developed PNB's brand strategy and communications to support and align with Boal's vision of expanding the artistic repertoire in a way that shows the diversity of ballet and helps all audiences find their place at PNB. When it comes to young audiences, Boal wants to show them that ballet is not necessarily what they think it is. He wants them to be able to say, “Ballet is for me . . . not necessarily [just] for my mom or for my grandmother.”

These goals are reflected in the diversity of work PNB puts on stage. To support this message on the marketing side, PNB's advertising uses eye-catching images that present the dancers in different offstage contexts. The advertising is designed to challenge assumptions about ballet and also about what PNB presents. At the same time, the advertising respects the traditions of excellence that the company has stood for to maintain relevance with those audiences who have come to love PNB for its more traditional repertoire (and who will hopefully feel comfortable exploring new work).

19. See Michael Kaiser and Brett Egan, *The Cycle: Planning for Success in the Arts* (Washington, D.C.: Devos Institute of Arts Management, 2011), for a discussion of institutional branding—which is multifaceted and extends beyond communications to multiple activities—and how it complements programmatic marketing.

As mentioned earlier, Walker believes that if PNB had inserted the new functionality and video into the existing website, the look and feel of the old site would have limited the impact of the new content. But it could have been even more damaging if PNB had just revised its marketing materials to promise a more inclusive, accessible, and artistically diverse company without actually reflecting what was happening artistically; that kind of incongruence likely would have confused or disappointed newcomers and existing audiences alike.²⁰ Instead, their efforts aligned around a common purpose build upon one another, creating momentum.

According to many press reviews, Boal's artistic direction has invigorated the company and infused it with excitement. Although it is beyond the scope of this case study, the artistic experience is unquestionably the central element in building sustained audience engagement.²¹ PNB's marketing strategy with young audiences worked because it was grounded in Boal's artistic vision and an understanding of the perceptions, misperceptions, and apprehension that audiences had about ballet. In a world where many teens and young adults believed that ballet was irrelevant, boring, or stiff, PNB's marketing materials and steady flow of content in social media spaces where teens and young adults frequently hang out sent a message that PNB would challenge those stereotypes and reveal a dynamic art form that everyone could enjoy.

20. Many contemporary brand strategy frameworks begin with the premise that brands primarily get built through the actual experiences people have with organizations, and marketing plays a supporting role. At best, marketing communications can draw attention to that experience, build audience expectations around it, and then subsequently reinforce it. See, for example, Scott M. Davis and Michael Dunn, *Building the Brand-Driven Business* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002).

21. Echoing that sentiment, in their discussion of institutional marketing referred to above, Michael Kaiser and Brett Egan note that, "Bold, surprising, transformational programming is in itself our primary, and best, form of institutional marketing," Kaiser and Egan, 9.

MOVING FORWARD

The grant period for the Wallace Excellence Award has ended, but PNB's cultivation of and momentum with young audiences continue. Sales remained steady in the 2013–2014 season, with the company selling upwards of 300 TeenTix and over 200 of the 25 & Under tickets for each production. Observers might be tempted to downplay the importance of the teen and young adult attendance by pointing to the low ticket price points, but Boal explains that the *current* revenue stream is not the primary objective of these programs, which will produce the ticket buyers and supporters of the future. Speaking of the new young visitors, he states, "Those are seeds, and planting those seeds is essential. Sometimes we're depressed that the financial result does not come back by the end of the fiscal year, but 15 fiscal years away we'll be thankful for all our planting of the seeds."

PNB will continue its existing age-specific price promotions while giving more attention to cultivating those young adult subscribers ages 26 to 39, who did not show the same growth as teens and audience members under age 26. PNB is now looking at Backstage Pass as an important ticket purchase pathway for young adults when they age out of the 25 & Under ticket program. While many of these patrons in their late 20s and 30s could now afford to pay more than \$15 per ticket, the stark difference in price between those and regular-priced tickets might discourage them. PNB staff believe there needs to be a transitional program with the same visibility as TeenTix and

25 & Under. The matter took on some urgency when PNB added birth-year information to its patron database and discovered there were 13,000 households in this 21-to-39 age range who were not currently Backstage Pass members. PNB believes the size of this audience warrants a more prominent audience cultivation effort.

Backstage Pass was a legacy program that predated the current initiative and was designed originally to serve development objectives—to attract young adults to special events where their interest in supporting PNB could be cultivated—not necessarily to build PNB’s audience. Run out of the development department and managed by an all-volunteer board, Backstage Pass historically had relied on existing members to spread the word about events. While it yielded a small circle of professionals including members of Seattle’s largest and most prestigious organizations, Backstage Pass simply was not geared to send the same kind of welcome message to a broader base of young adults over age 25. Nor was there the same marketing support for this age group as there was, for example, for 25 & Under. That discrepancy has not gone unnoticed, and PNB is putting more marketing behind the program to give it the same opportunities for success as its other access programs for younger audiences.

PNB has changed the name of the program from Backstage Pass to the Young Patrons Circle. It’s more than just a name change—the program’s objectives are now more focused on building a broader young adult audience. “We want to break down any barriers to attendance they may have and make sure they feel welcome here,” says Walker. She believes that increasing the visibility of the Young Patrons Circle is an important first step, and the marketing department is also now partnering with development to achieve that goal. At the start of the 2013–2014 season, PNB announced the Young Patrons Circle as

a membership program in an informational brochure mailed to the 13,000 age-appropriate households found in its database. The \$60 membership entitles members to a 20 percent discount on single tickets or 40 percent off of a subscription, in addition to access to a members’ lounge and invitations to social events (similar to the legacy program).

The response to the brochure and continued promotion of the Young Patrons Circle program has, however, been disappointing to date. Even as PNB has sold hundreds of tickets to teens and young adults for each production during its 2013–2014 season, the company has sold far fewer tickets (typically less than 50 per production) to Young Patrons Circle members, and membership in the program remains at around 80. Certainly, as teens and young adults move into mid-adulthood they are more likely than younger audiences to have job pressures and young children, but those commitments do not explain the sharp difference between the solid response to the 25 & Under promotions and the considerably lower interest in the Young Patrons Circle. Given that social interaction is often seen as an important motivator of young adult audience engagement, one might expect the Young Patrons Circle to have greater, not less, appeal than PNB’s other access programs for teens and young adults (which do not have the social component that the Young Patrons Circle does). Based on conversations with younger patrons, as well as trends and research in the field, Walker believes there are two major obstacles to overcome. The first is price, because even with a 20 percent discount, the least expensive single ticket purchased through Young Patrons Circle (approximately \$30) is twice as expensive as a 25 & Under ticket (\$15 for one, \$25 for two). The second obstacle is the financial (and, perhaps, psychological) commitment of paying a \$60 membership fee up front. Walker insists the company is not giving up on understanding,

motivating, and building a sustained following among this audience.

Moving even earlier in the patron life cycle, PNB has introduced a Family Fairy Tales subscription designed and marketed for families with young children. Depending on the season and which shows PNB thinks would most appeal to children, the package includes three or four family-friendly programs at a 17 to 20 percent discount, similar to the discount that full subscribers receive. Family Fairy Tales is the only PNB subscription package that includes *Nutcracker*. One hope for the program is that it will give children ages 3 to 13 early exposure to the ballet, leading to subsequent attendance via TeenTix and later programs. In its first three years, Family Fairy Tales has been a success, with sales of 800 to 1,500 subscriptions per season. (PNB staff believe that the fluctuation is largely a function of the programming.)

The success of Family Fairy Tales only adds to the success PNB has found with its teen and young adult age-specific promotions. While Boal is happy that the numbers show momentum, he appears even more pleased that the company is starting to change minds and becoming something many young people care about. “I think the great thing is when these younger audiences come to a performance and then say, ‘I just did not think it was going to be like that. I really thought I knew what the ballet was, and it’s something different,’” says Boal. “There were young people who were wowed to discover, ‘There’s a place for me in that.’ They say, ‘That music speaks to me. That storyline hinted at something that I deal with in my life.’ Maybe it’s just the Next Step performance that they relate to and look forward to each year. Hopefully, there’s a place.”

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- Arts organizations from operas to museums sometimes lose potential audiences because they seem remote, reinforcing feelings that those organizations have little to offer the uninitiated. How hard is it for new audiences to get to know your organization? How could you help them get to know you better?
- Does your brand extend a welcome to new audiences? How would audiences that were unsure they could understand your art form respond to your website and communications?
- Seattle’s TeenTix was a ready-made community that PNB could plug into. Are there similar communities for young people in your community? If not, is there some way that you could help create such a community to “plant the seeds” for the future?
- PNB assumed that younger audiences would be less interested in traditional repertoire and more interested in bold, new choreographers. Their research showed that the opposite was true, because these younger audiences were drawn toward familiar, well-known stories. What untested assumptions does your organization make about new audiences? How could you test these assumptions to see if they are really true?
- Study after study shows that perceptions of elitism lead newcomers to avoid the arts because they feel that they do not belong. Although most arts managers would say

that the elitism is just a perception, it is a widely held perception and a powerful deterrent. What gestures can help newcomers know they are welcome and that they, too, have “a place”?

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Bob Harlow, PhD, is a social psychologist and statistician who develops research programs that help organizations more deeply understand their target audiences. He has partnered with marketing managers and senior executives at some of the world’s largest companies and leading nonprofit organizations to develop brand, communications, and operations strategies. He has held senior and management positions at IBM and at market research consulting groups such as Yankelovich Partners, RONIN, and KRC, and currently leads Bob Harlow Research and Consulting, LLC, a market research consulting organization.

Bob has written hundreds of surveys and conducted hundreds of focus groups and interviews with broad audiences in 30 countries. He has more than a dozen scholarly publications in social psychology and research methods, and is the lead author of The Wallace Foundation publication series Wallace Studies in Building Arts Audiences. He has a PhD from Princeton University in social psychology and completed the postdoctoral program in quantitative analysis at New York University’s Stern School of Business and Graduate School of Arts and Science.

Tricia Heywood conducts research that informs brand and communications strategies. She began her career in Bangkok and has worked with leading consumer goods companies and

communications firms on three continents, and has conducted research around the globe in 16 countries.

In addition to positions at market research firms, Tricia spent five years as marketing director for an alternative energy consumer product company in London, ran the Vancouver office for Weber Shandwick Worldwide, consulted with a sponsorship strategy agency for the 2010 Winter Olympic and Paralympic Games, and served as executive director for Alexandra's Playground, a nonprofit dedicated to creating play spaces for children around the world. She is currently a partner at Onesixtyfourth, a strategic brand consultancy.


Tricia holds a Masters of International Management from Simon Fraser University, Vancouver.

Colorplate 1. PNB.org Homepage in Early 2006



PACIFIC NORTHWEST BALLET

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- **Red Angels** (Einhorn/Dove)
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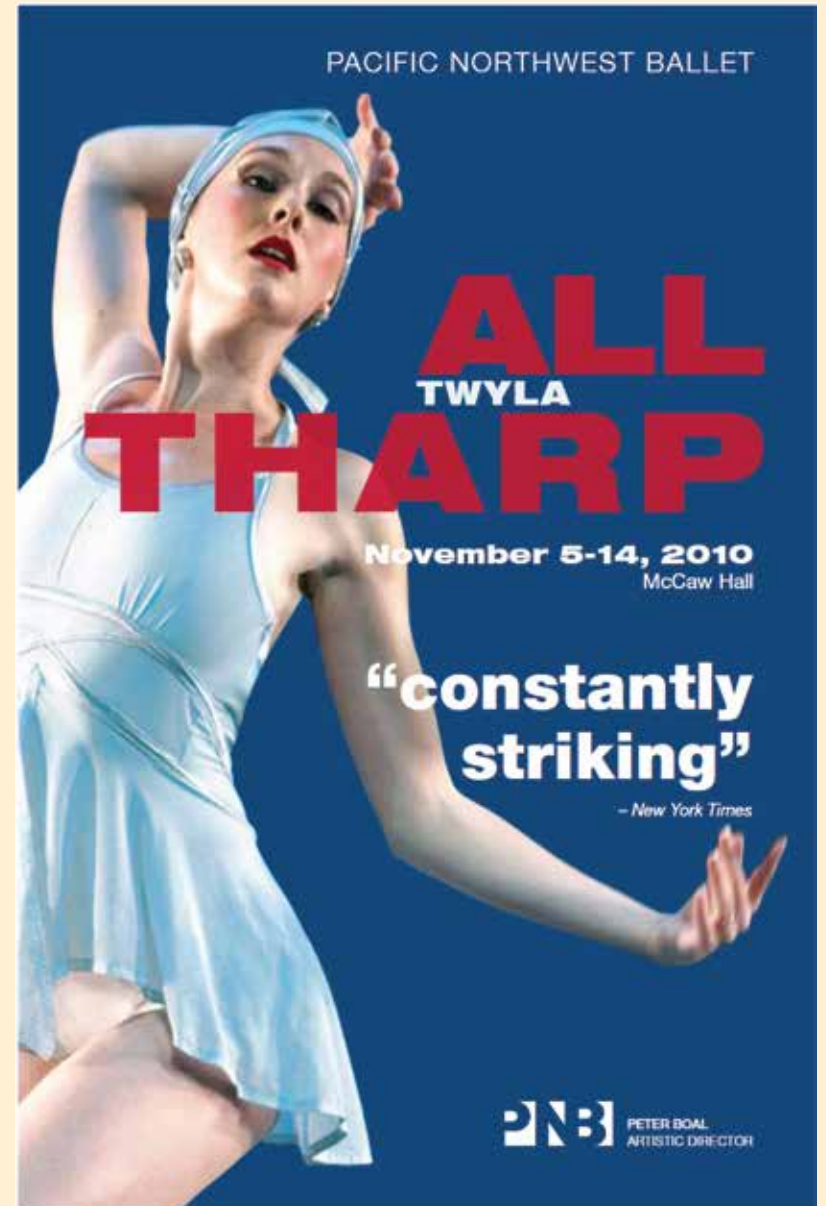
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Photos: Leslie Rausch and Jordan Paulin in *Red Angels*, Photography by Angela Sterling

Colorplates 2 and 3. Advertising with Original and New Brand Look



Original



New

Colorplate 4. PNB.org Homepage, Fall 2009



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This look at the Pacific Northwest Ballet's effort to expand its audience is the sixth case study in a series of 10 offering insights into how arts organizations can attract new audiences to the arts and deepen the involvement of current audiences. Written for arts organization leaders, arts funders, policymakers, and arts management students, each study is the product of independent research exploring the success and challenges faced by different arts organizations as they undertook multi-year efforts to build their audiences. Strategic and tactical elements of each program are described in depth, along with factors that helped and hindered progress. Putting together findings from the 10 case studies, a separate report, *The Road to Results*, describes nine practices that arts organizations can use to make their audience-building programs more effective.

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