

# MORE THAN JUST A PARTY

HOW THE ISABELLA STEWART GARDNER MUSEUM  
BOOSTED PARTICIPATION BY YOUNG ADULTS



by Bob Harlow, Thomas Alfieri, Aaron Dalton, and Anne Field

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## PREFACE

This case study describes the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum's efforts to attract eighteen- to thirty-four-year-olds to the museum and its collection and engage and inspire them. It is part of a larger set of four case studies, commissioned by The Wallace Foundation, of arts organizations' efforts to reach new audiences and deepen relationships with current audiences.

These studies come at a time of particular urgency. According to the National Endowment for the Arts' *2008 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts*, American adults' participation in key activities such as attending live performances and visiting museums is at its lowest levels since the survey began tracking it in 1982.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, the arts audience has grown older than the general population. The message is clear: Arts organizations need to attract and engage new audiences to ensure their artistic and financial viability.

Yet the work of these four organizations and the case study investigations describing them was undertaken not with a view that actual *interest* in the arts is waning, but with a hope, shared by many, that we are witnessing a dynamic shift in participation, both in amount and in form. Much evidence suggests that Americans are longing to take part in the arts but want to do so beyond how we have come to define (or measure) participation.<sup>2</sup>

1. National Endowment for the Arts, *2008 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts* (Washington, D.C.: National Endowment for the Arts, 2009), 2–3.

2. Steven J. Tepper and Yang Gao, "Engaging Art: What Counts?," in *Engaging Art: The Next Great Transformation of America's Cultural Life*, eds. Steven J. Tepper and Bill Ivey (New York: Routledge, 2008), 17–47.

Twenty-first-century Americans may be looking for a more interactive or participatory experience, for example.<sup>3</sup> In response, inventive organizations are trying to share their art in ways that help their mission and resources dovetail with the preferences and lifestyles of potential audiences.

The cases describe and evaluate newly launched or expanded participation-building programs designed and implemented by four organizations involved in different artistic disciplines: the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Steppenwolf Theatre Company, the San Francisco Girls Chorus, and Boston Lyric Opera. They lay out how these efforts were created and run and also identify strategic and tactical elements driving results. In the process, we explore such questions as: What program and organizational factors produce success? What are the costs, benefits, and trade-offs associated with building participation? What is the broader impact on arts organizations that undertake it?

Each case study in the series includes background information on each organization and the events that led to its participation-building program. The case studies begin with a brief synopsis, much like an abstract, and a “scene-setter” describing an actual component of that program. A section summarizing the specific participation-building challenges faced by the organization and the program it built to address them follows. Then we include more detail about strategy, tactics, and key decisions made as the organization developed its approach. We detail both how program outcomes were measured and their results, and provide an evaluative analysis of those results, highlighting the key drivers behind them. Finally, we pose central questions for arts organizations to consider if they’re facing similar audience

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3. See, for example, Henry Jenkins and Vanessa Bertozzi, “Artistic Expression in the Age of Participatory Culture: How and Why Young People Create,” in *Engaging Art: The Next Great Transformation of America’s Cultural Life*, eds. Steven J. Tepper and Bill Ivey (New York: Routledge, 2008), 171–195.

challenges or weighing the possibility of implementing programs like those described in the case study.

The case studies are the product of multiple interviews with key staff and an analysis of program elements, budgets, and planning documents, as well as qualitative and quantitative research undertaken by independent consultants and the organizations themselves to inform and evaluate their own efforts. We also examined a wide variety of indicators, such as ticket purchase, online activity, and participation in a broad array of programming.

Ultimately, there are limits to the general conclusions we can draw from the case studies: These were not scientifically controlled experiments. And each of the four organizations studied designed a different program aimed at a different target audience. Nonetheless, we can discern some general principles that other arts organizations can learn from and adopt.

**1. Market research can sharpen engagement-strategy development and execution.** Organizations that want to engage new audiences or deepen existing relationships need to understand what audiences are looking for. Many of the organizations profited by using market research to identify more precisely how current and potential audiences think about their organizations, how they think about the kind of art they provide, and the experience those audiences are seeking. For some professionals, especially artistic and programming staff, soliciting audience opinion runs the risk of overtly pandering to public taste, thereby sacrificing artistic integrity (sometimes referred to as “dumbing down”). But listening to participants can provide observations needed to create innovative, creative, and deeply engaging programs—insights that, for these organizations, sometimes revealed an unexpected level of sophistication among audience members as

well. Artistic staff at Steppenwolf and the San Francisco Girls Chorus even found that audiences welcomed bolder artistic choices; the artistic mission was fortified.

The case studies suggest that rigorous research, even though it may not yet be the norm in arts organizations, is crucial to understanding audiences and evaluating progress. It isn't enough, for example, to make assumptions based on ticket sales. Listening to audiences means conducting well-constructed research to pinpoint what they're looking for from your art form and your organization. It requires doing both quantitative and qualitative studies to inform strategy, evaluate results, and make course corrections on the road to meeting participation-building objectives. In uncertain economic times, when every dollar counts, such research is especially important to ensure that participation-building programs are structured correctly and are on track.

**2. Audiences are open to engaging the arts in new and different ways.** All of the organizations were successful when they provided new avenues for audiences to find a “way in” to their art. For example:

- Creating unique social gatherings that encourage discussions around the art collection, as at *Gardner After Hours*
- Facilitating critical thinking and dialogue about theater, as Steppenwolf has done on its website and in post-show discussions
- Providing interactive and educational programs to introduce new audiences to the arts, like the Boston Lyric Opera's preview program, which gives children (and many adults) a first-time glimpse into the workings of opera in a familiar and comfortable setting
- Using visual communications to telegraph an unexpected level of professionalism and artistic sophistication, as

the San Francisco Girls Chorus has done in its carefully designed marketing communications makeover

**3. Participation-building is ongoing, not a one-time initiative.** Cultivating audiences is an effort that can never be viewed as finished. The organizations studied continue to fine-tune their programs, and even alter program objectives as they learn more about their audiences or as the relationships with audiences change. After making strides toward creating a dialogue with existing audience members, Steppenwolf Theatre Company is opening the conversation to an even wider spectrum of new theatergoers; the Gardner Museum continues to examine and revise a program that has exceeded its expectations; the San Francisco Girls Chorus is investigating how it can encourage repeat visits from the new audience of classical music patrons it has attracted; Boston Lyric Opera is reviewing matters related to performance location and strategic partnerships as critical determinants of programs to bring opera to young people.

**4. Audience-building efforts should be fully integrated into every element of an organization, not a separate initiative or program.** That means they can't be run by just one or two departments or as add-on initiatives unrelated to the overall mission. When participation-building objectives are embraced by the entire organization and conceptualized and implemented as an outgrowth of the overall mission, staff can have clarity of purpose and visitors an “authentic” or deeply felt experience, and the institution's goals can be most fully realized.

**5. Mission is critical.** Programs that emerge from an organization's mission, when that mission is clear and supported throughout the organization, develop in an environment in which they can thrive. At the same time, these programs are better able to provide the rich experiences audiences are look-

ing for, because they draw on and offer to the public those things about which organizations care most.<sup>4</sup> The Gardner Museum and Steppenwolf Theatre Company in particular built rich programs around their unique missions and philosophies about experiencing art. As a result, their programs have connected audiences more deeply with their art, and have attracted new audiences in large numbers.

Finally, we hope these case studies inspire. These programs demonstrate what is possible with strategic thinking and solid implementation. They prove that arts organizations don't have to be victims of a trend, but instead can be masters of their destinies, contributing to a vigorous, thriving, and viable artistic community.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

**A** great many individuals and organizations assisted us in our research, and we want to give them our heartfelt thanks. 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 and Pamela Mendels, as well as former staff members Catherine Fukushima, Rory McPherson, and Mary Trudel. Ann Stone of The Wallace Foundation tirelessly provided invaluable strategic guidance and insight from the project's beginnings to its final conclusions.

We offer our sincere thanks to the staffs and boards of the four organizations we studied. Their candor will, we trust, pay

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4. B. Joseph Pine II and James H. Gilmore, "Museums and Authenticity," *Museum News* 86 (2007): 76-80, <http://www.aam-us.org/pubs/mn/authenticity.cfm>. Pine and Gilmore suggest that in a world of increasing competition for leisure time, people are looking for strong experiences. They suggest that arts organizations can render such strong experiences if they stay true to themselves and express a strong identity outward.

important dividends in the form of additional knowledge about what works and what does not in engaging audiences. We were fortunate to have liaisons at each of the four organizations who helped us work through the details and dedicated much of their own time to ensuring that the case studies were as informative as possible. These include Peggy Burchenal and Julie Crites at the Gardner Museum, Melanie Smith and Polly Springhorn of the San Francisco Girls Chorus, Judith McMichael and Julie House of Boston Lyric Opera, and Linda Garrison of Steppenwolf Theatre Company. As we sought to formulate the key questions and identify critical learnings from the cases, we were also fortunate to have extensive feedback on strategic direction and conclusions from several leading arts practitioners, including Jim Hirsch of the Chicago Sinfonietta, Molly Smith of Arena Stage, Kelly Tweeddale of Seattle Opera, Laura Sweet of the Ordway Center for the Performing Arts, Bonnie Pitman of the Dallas Museum of Art, and Stephanie Hughley of the New Jersey Performing Arts Center. Finally, Sandra Radoff and Mari Henninger provided important technical assistance as we examined the data the organizations collected. Of course, the final responsibility for the questions posed and conclusions drawn rests with us.

*Bob Harlow*



## SUMMARY

**M**any arts organizations face a similar challenge—declining participation by young adults—creating an urgent need to attract and engage eighteen- to thirty-four-year-olds. For the staff of Boston’s Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, however, meeting that challenge involved a particularly tricky sleight of hand: increasing the number of young adult visitors while staying true to the institution’s mission. Created at the turn of the twentieth century by wealthy art patron Isabella Stewart Gardner to house her vast art collection, the one-of-a-kind Gardner Museum operated under rules dictated by Gardner’s will: the arrangement of the artwork could not be changed, so as to preserve her aesthetic vision.

Senior management gave a team of young middle managers the authority to plan and run an evening event aimed both at attracting more eighteen- to thirty-four-year-olds and encouraging them to engage with the art. Through a series of inventive steps, from hosting games that enabled exploration of the artworks to using hip, young volunteers, the team created a program that exceeded its expectations. Crowds consistently are at capacity; 73% of visitors fall into the target demographic; the museum has recruited 241 new members; 25% of attendees are repeat visitors; and 93% explore the galleries.

*It's a blustery, bone-chilling February evening in Boston. But inside the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, a Venetian palazzo planted improbably in the Fenway Park area, the atmosphere is convivial. A lively crowd of twenty-somethings is buzzing, chatting, clinking glasses. On the first floor, couples and groups of friends, some still dressed in work clothes, others in jeans and sweaters, hold glasses of wine or a beer, chatting in the dimly lit, moody, intimate ambiance of the Gardner, a fifteenth-century Venetian-style palace built by the museum's namesake a century ago. In the middle of the action, a DJ plays jazz in a lush garden courtyard overflowing with tropical and flowering plants.*

*On the second floor, in a room dominated by a group of imposing sixteenth-century tapestries, about a hundred visitors listen to a circus ensemble playing an eclectic mix of gypsy, jazz, tango, and klezmer. In a room nearby, small groups chat amiably while studying a portrait of an imposing aristocrat in armor and an ornate breadbox made from a rich walnut. Because the artworks lack any labeling, visitors don't realize the painting is by Peter Paul Rubens or the breadbox is from eighteenth-century France—and that only fuels more discussion. Up one more flight, an attentive group of fifteen stands before a portrait of Isabella Stewart Gardner herself, painted by John Singer Sargent, many of them taking part in a spirited discussion about the picture led by a museum volunteer of about their age.*

*This mix of genuine artistic curiosity and intimate social gathering is the hallmark of Gardner After Hours. So are the attendees—700 or so bona fide Gen-Yers. After Hours draws young profes-*

sionals and college students looking for food, fun, good company, a little culture—and perhaps the start of a lifelong affinity for the institution. Many of these young partygoers have already become faithful patrons—a quarter each night are repeat visitors. And that’s just one sign of the appeal of Gardner After Hours. Held on the third Thursday of every month from 5:30 to 9:30 p.m., the program has seen attendance increase steadily since it was launched in 2007; crowds are now usually at or near capacity.

But while visitors come to socialize, once there, most end up roaming around the museum’s three floors of galleries, which house the more than 2,500 paintings, sculptures, tapestries, furniture, manuscripts, rare books, and decorative arts carefully amassed and installed by Gardner. And their conversation often focuses on the works themselves. They may come for a party, but they wind up engaged by the art, trading ideas, impressions, questions, and insights in a way that would have made Isabella Gardner proud.

## DWINDLING PARTICIPATION BY YOUNG ADULTS

**A**fter Hours is the Gardner’s response to a challenge faced by arts organizations across the United States: attracting younger audiences and creating a relationship with the next generation. Gardner, like museums, orchestras, and opera companies across the land, faces a grim demographic reality: participation is declining and the most loyal patrons are aging. The recent National Endowment for the Arts *Survey of Public Participation in the Arts* revealed the continuation of a long-term trend of declining arts participation, including museum visits, among eighteen- to thirty-four-year-olds.<sup>5</sup> That same survey also showed that, as a group, visitors to arts organizations are growing older.

It’s a disturbing trend that threatens the very viability of arts organizations. Indeed, declining participation by a younger generation portends challenges for a vibrant and robust artistic future. And it creates an urgent need to find ways both to attract eighteen- to thirty-four-year-old participants and to provide experiences tailored to their unique interests that are likely to encourage long-term engagement.

For Director Anne Hawley, reaching a younger audience was especially important for boosting interest in the museum’s pro-

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5. National Endowment for the Arts *Survey of Public Participation in the Arts: Trend Tables 2008* (Washington, D.C.: National Endowment for the Arts), <http://www.nea.gov/research/SPPA/trends.pdf>, 8.

grams in contemporary art and music and its artist-in-residence series. Although many eighteen- to thirty-four-year-olds visited the Gardner, members mostly were considerably older and tended to focus on the collection's historic art, which encompassed the permanent collection, and classical music. "We needed to find a way to engage young adults on a deeper level," she says.

But as Julie Crites, the museum's then twenty-something director of program planning, began to conceptualize the effort that would result in *After Hours* in 2005, she and her colleagues faced some stiff challenges. They knew from their own experience that for young adults, going out meant engaging in social activities. And, of course, they were well aware of the success formula at other similar institutions: programs for young adults had to take place after work and offer opportunities to interact with friends. However, research showed that in the minds of the target audience, museums were less associated with socializing than other arts venues, particularly those in the performing arts. Attending a play with friends or a date seemed more like a night out. What's more, while many institutions had demonstrated it was possible to get young adults to come occasionally to a social event at a museum after work, encouraging them to engage with the collection and the museum itself was another matter entirely. Usually, the art got lost.

Other potential hurdles came from constraints imposed by the museum's unique vision. Its founder, a patron of the arts with a larger-than-life personality and deeply held views, had built the museum at the turn of the twentieth century to house her personal collection. But Gardner had a clear mission in mind: to create an experience in which visitors engaged directly and personally with the art, unencumbered by any labels or other displays offering information about artist, style, or dates. Her ultimate goal was to create a salon, a place where curious, pas-

sionate art lovers took part in lively, meaningful conversation. It was a vision she wanted to live on even after she was gone. The museum's seal, created by Gardner and Boston artist and designer Sarah Wyman Whitman, says it all: a phoenix (a symbol of immortality) placed above the phrase *C'est mon plaisir* ("It is my pleasure"). To protect that vision, Gardner stipulated in her will that exhibits in the museum could not be altered or moved permanently. In addition, Gardner staff has continued to honor her tradition of not placing labels next to the art, to encourage visitors to experience the works in a direct and personal way as she had intended.

There also were unique physical limitations. The museum's twelve galleries varied in size; some, in fact, were quite small. The décor, of necessity unchanged after more than a hundred years, had the feeling of something from another time. Plus, the museum relied mostly on daylight; at a nighttime event, it might be difficult to see the art.

At the same time, the opportunities for the Gardner were particularly rich. If young adults tended to shy away from museums as venues for socializing, then finding a way to counter their perception could only serve to expand participation by that demographic significantly. Located in Boston, with a preponderance of eighteen- to thirty-four-year-olds, the potential population to draw from was huge.

For the Gardner, then, the challenge was to do more than create a program that provided a fun, social night out or even to attract more young adults to an institution often perceived as old-fashioned. It had to develop an experience through which visitors explored the art in a way that fulfilled the Gardner's mission: attendees had to leave their drinks behind, tour the galleries, and engage with one another in discussions about what they saw.

Building on Isabella Gardner’s vision, the museum came up with a solution that, after some tinkering and experimentation, has exceeded their expectations. *Gardner After Hours* now offers a unique way for young adults to socialize, with the collection as a focal point for interaction. Just listen to Crites: “This has probably been the most successful program we’ve had, bringing in a new audience in a much bigger way than ever before.” Figure 1 (also Colorplate 1) provides just a glimpse of that experience. How the museum achieved this outcome and the lessons it learned offer valuable insights for any arts organization trying to expand its reach to new audiences.



**Figure 1. *After Hours Party***

Photo by Derek Kouyoumjian; Courtesy of the Gardner Museum, Boston

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### ISABELLA STEWART GARDNER MUSEUM AT A GLANCE

- Mission: The museum exercises cultural and civic leadership by nurturing a new generation of talent in the arts and humanities; by delivering the works of creators and performers to the public; and by reaching out to involve and serve its community. The collection is at the center of this effort as an inspiring encounter with beauty and art.
  - Founded at the turn of the twentieth century by Isabella Stewart Gardner
  - Houses Gardner’s personal art collection: more than 2,500 paintings, sculptures, tapestries, furniture, manuscripts, rare books, and decorative arts
  - Director: Anne Hawley
  - Curator of Education and Public Programs: Peggy Burchenal
  - Director of Program Planning: Julie Crites
  - Public Relations Director: Katherine Armstrong
  - Director of Visitor Learning: Jennifer DePrizio
  - Public Programs Assistant: Lilly O’Flaherty
  - Operating budget: \$10.0 million (2010)
  - Total number of visitors a year: 169,000 (2010)
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## **BUILDING THE VISION FOR GARDNER AFTER HOURS**

In fact, *Gardner After Hours* began as Crites's vision. Not long after she arrived at the museum in 2003 at the age of twenty-six, she started to mull over a problem: the museum's hours. Her friends and contemporaries liked to socialize and participate in other leisure activities directly after work. But the museum was only open from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m., Tuesday through Sunday, with no evening hours. And that meant the Gardner was missing a prime opportunity to reach out to young working adults. The answer seemed simple: open the museum at night.

But that conclusion led to other considerations. For one thing, just extending museum hours wouldn't be enough to attract young visitors. Many museums, both in the city and elsewhere, held regular evening social events. Surely the Gardner could do the same thing. At the same time, merely holding an event at night was bound to have a limited impact, encouraging current visitors, but not new audiences, to come. To broaden its appeal, the Gardner needed to make the museum attractive to its target group. And that meant breaking down crucial assumptions the staff suspected were held by many potential young adult patrons. One was a perception that the museum was too old-fashioned—what Crites calls “fusty and dusty.” The other, a perception that they themselves lacked sufficient expertise to enjoy a museum visit and, in fact, might feel intimidated or con-

cerned about appearing ignorant. It was imperative, therefore, to create an event able to attract the museum's target demographic and challenge perceptions of the museum experience. At the same time, Crites and her staff wanted not just to attract new audiences, but also to encourage visitors to engage with the rich collection to which they themselves felt a deep commitment.

Crites also realized the physical limitations of the museum could be turned into strengths. Rather than detract from the experience, the low lighting in the palazzo galleries would create a distinctly romantic atmosphere. The small galleries might seem intimate, and the lack of labeling might make the art more accessible. By placing musicians or DJs in the open courtyard, music would drift through to the galleries on the higher floors, bringing the party upstairs. Says Crites: “It's like you never leave the party. You're always in it, even when you're not down there amongst it.”

Not long before Crites had arrived, a working committee of four from Visitor Services, Marketing, and Education had formed the beginnings of a plan to open the museum at night. But, due to concerns about adding to the hours of the Gardner's small security staff, the proposal was put on hold. Drawing on that work, Crites and Katherine Armstrong, public relations director and herself a member of the eighteen- to thirty-four-year-old target group, put together a rough outline of an evening event. They, too, had to put their plan on hold, this time because the museum lacked the budget to take it to the next step. That changed in 2006, when the staff received a five-year grant from The Wallace Foundation. Crites was ready to get to work.

Education and Public Programs Curator Peggy Burchenal felt success hinged on allowing a group of people the same age as the museum's target demographic to be in charge. They would have a natural understanding of how to reach the desired market.

For that reason, Crites and her team were given an unusual level of responsibility for everything from designing and promoting the event to budgeting and staffing. Along with Crites, key staff included Armstrong, who primarily helped with brainstorming

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**SUCCESS HINGED ON ALLOWING A GROUP OF PEOPLE THE SAME AGE AS THE MUSEUM'S TARGET DEMOGRAPHIC TO BE IN CHARGE.**

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ing about programming ideas, as well as leading marketing and promotions, and Jennifer DePrizio (also in the eighteen- to thirty-four-year-old target group), director of visitor

learning, who played a major role once the event got under way.

Drawing on their own experiences and those of their friends as an initial first step, supplemented later with market research, the group brainstormed about the kinds of events they gravitated toward and enjoyed. They also addressed ways to attack the intimidation factor, in order to attract guests who normally didn't visit museums. And they mulled over how they usually learned about events in the area, to pinpoint the best ways to get the word out about the evening.

It was thanks to those discussions that Crites came to understand the importance of offering not just live music and DJs, but beer and wine as well—something of concern to CFO Peter Bryant, who worried that guests would either spill their drinks on works of art, simply drink too much and engage in activities that would harm the collection, or expose the Gardner to other liabilities. The Gardner had hosted many wine receptions in the past, but not at events targeting this demographic group. There was some evidence to support that fear—accounts of visitors to museums who had overindulged and damaged artwork.

For Crites, however, serving alcohol was non-negotiable: an important signal that the event was, at least in part, a social

one. After a series of discussions, she convinced museum staff to place trust in the visiting public. The museum's usual precautionary measures would be sufficient: a cash bar would be available around the courtyard, away from the collection, and security guards on duty would ensure that guests kept their drinks in the designated area. Currently, while the arrangement causes occasional tensions with visitors who would prefer to wander the galleries with drinks in hand, there have been no incidents involving alcohol.

More important to Crites and the museum staff, however, was designing a program that ensured visitors engaged with the collection. And providing music and access to drinks couldn't accomplish that goal. In fact, a bar might even discourage exploration if it became the focal point for the evening. To that end, the team created programming designed to encourage active involvement with the art. "A lot of museums holding after-hours events will have a bar and a DJ, and they'll stop there, and then they wonder why people drink but do not explore. It's because they weren't given anything to do. You have to channel them, you have to give them ways in," observes Crites.

The final logistical decision to be made was when to hold the event. Like other museums with after-hours gatherings, Crites and her team wanted to have theirs on a regularly scheduled evening each month. For a few reasons, the third Thursday made the most sense. First, the Gardner offered a lecture series on occasional Thursdays, so holding *After Hours* on that night was a natural fit. They also saw Thursday as a "pre-weekend" night when people tended to want to go out but not stay up as late as they might on a Friday or Saturday.

Plus, holding the event on Fridays had special problems. It might be difficult to get volunteers and staff to help out on a night that was the start of the weekend. Also, Boston's Museum

of Fine Arts already had an event the first Friday of every month, and that evening was also a popular time for gallery openings. By scheduling *After Hours* later in the month and on a different day of the week, the staff would distinguish the evening from other events and also avoid competing with them. The event would open on the third Thursday of September 2007, and be held for ten evenings in the first year (every month through June), later expanding to eleven months in the second year and a full-year schedule in 2009–2010.

## KEY COMPONENTS: PROGRAMMING, STAFFING, AND PROMOTION

**T**he Gardner’s efforts were built around three pillars:

### 1. PROGRAMMING—ENCOURAGING ENGAGEMENT AND INTERACTION

The first imperative in building programming was to avoid falling back on the usual approaches—typical formal programming that could intimidate the casual first-time visitor. “For people who aren’t regular museumgoers there are some barriers; they wonder, ‘Am I smart enough?’ ‘Do I know enough about art history?’ ‘Don’t I have to know a lot in order to enjoy myself?’” says Burchenal. “What we’re trying to do with programming in *After Hours* is to break down those barriers.” It was all about enabling conversation—creating a dialogue in which visitors would feel free to participate and through which they could exchange ideas about the art in a welcoming atmosphere. Several programming elements were designed around these objectives.

**1) Viewfinder talks.** A cornerstone of the programming, these are informal fifteen-minute discussions for groups of fifteen—gallery capacity won’t allow for any more—that provide a low-pressure introduction to the museum and Isabella Gardner. Thanks to their short length, they’re less likely than a longer gallery tour to break the easy flow of the evening.

Led by museum volunteers, who also are young adults,



all Viewfinder talks focus on a provocative painting of Isabella Gardner by John Singer Sargent. The portrait depicts Gardner in a form-fitting dress, leaning forward in a pose uncharacteristic of a female pillar of turn-of-the-century Boston society, as shown in Figure 2 and Colorplate 2. In fact, the painting created a stir in its day for that reason. It's a portrait that reveals volumes about Gardner and, therefore, serves as a useful vehicle for discussing her life and philosophy, as well as the painting as a work of art.

The talk begins with the simple question, "What was so shocking about this portrait?" Volunteers then continue to frame other queries that have no right or wrong answers. Instead, they encourage visitors to bring their own knowledge and experience to the portrait, an approach that draws on the museum's larger educational programming philosophy. Called Visual Thinking Strategies, an educational curriculum designed by the Visual Understanding in Education organization, visitors learn to think critically about art and how to examine works in a way that's meaningful to them. Ultimately, as participants trade insights, they discover their own observations are as valid as anyone else's.

Visitors don't usually realize they're learning new critical thinking strategies. But, they often apply those techniques to the rest of their exploration. Ben Al MahFodh, a museum volunteer, recalls recently overheard conversations sparked by Frans Pourbus the Younger's sixteenth-century portrait *Infanta Isabella Clara Eugenia*, depicting a striking young aristocrat in flowing dress and impressive Elizabethan collar. Visitors chatted about the clothing, pointing to clues in the work to help reach conclusions about the art, with such comments as "Why would someone wear something like that?" or "In her expression, she doesn't look happy."

**2) Gallery games.** Soon after the event launched, the Gardner



**Figure 2. Viewfinder Talk on John Singer Sargent Portrait of Isabella Stewart Gardner**

Photo by Derek Kouyoumjian. Courtesy of the Gardner Museum, Boston.

hired market research consultants to hold informal interviews with groups of *After Hours* visitors, exploring a few areas: their reasons for coming and ways to create a compelling experience likely to foster continuing relationships with the museum. One valuable insight was that visitors wanted to meet new people, not just stick with their friends, and they hoped *After Hours* would provide an impetus for such an experience (see sidebar, *Using In-Depth Interviews to Create a Compelling Experience*). For Crites's team, the discovery provided an impetus to develop new programming that encouraged visitors not only to roam the galleries, but to interact

## USING IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS TO CREATE A COMPELLING EXPERIENCE

Early on, the Gardner commissioned qualitative research with *After Hours* visitors to understand how they could make the event more compelling to young adults. During *After Hours* events between November 2007 and May 2008, outside consultants conducted in-depth interviews with a total of 184 visitors during their visits. Through eight questions, researchers explored how the visitor groups experienced the *After Hours* environment, how that compared to other museums and jibed with what they looked for when going out, and ways to make *After Hours* more attractive. Most visitor groups were intercepted mid-visit, with a quarter of the groups approached as they were leaving. Interviewees also completed a brief demographic questionnaire, which revealed that visitors were between ages eighteen and forty-three (median age twenty-seven) and in social groups of three or more, for a total of fifty-five groups.

Through analysis of the interviews, the researchers concluded that *Gardner After Hours* provided the social experience young adults were looking for by providing opportunities to interact with and around the collection. Because the research highlighted the importance of the social element, it encouraged the staff to develop programming that could further connections among visitors, around the collection.

Some key findings included:

- Many young adults are looking for a social experience that will allow them to interact with friends and meet new people.
- Visitor quotes:
  - *[After Hours] is not your stereotypical bar or stereotypical night event. But that's why I think it's so marketable—because a lot of people are looking for something that connects people.*
  - *We were hoping that this would be more of a social, mingling event. It turned out [that] people seem to stay with their own groups, and so I think that was a little bit of a disappointment.*
- The art stimulates conversation among groups of visitors in a powerful way.
- Visitor quotes:
  - *I would say that it is easier to talk to your friends. It's like ready-made conversation starters, like the artwork itself.*
  - *It's a protected space where it's okay and sort of necessary to talk about ideas when [normally] you kind of have to break a lot of ice over beer or something to get to that point. ... And I think in an art museum [you] have some nice segues into that, whereas it can take you hours to get to that level of intimacy just in an ordinary gathering.*
- Young volunteers (see “*After Hours* Ambassadors,” on page 25) and museum activities encourage interaction around the art.

- Visitor quotes:
  - *The drawing activity helped us look at different pieces or captured the art as opposed to wandering around.*
  - *There was the [volunteer] that helped us identify an artist and talk[ed] to us about a painting. I just felt like that was great because if she wasn't there, then we wouldn't have had the opportunity to really discuss that.*
- The lighting and the setting create a unique and exciting atmosphere.
- Visitor quotes:
  - *The lighting and everything makes you feel like you're back when all the paintings were created.*
  - *I think it's so cool to do what Isabella used to do. She used to have functions like this all the time, so that's the part that I'm reveling in—feeling like I'm back there and a part of it.*
  - *I feel like there's something unique around every corner, whereas at most art museums the walls are very flat, and the exhibit is very contrived. You're kind of transported back in time a little bit when you're here.*

with one another as well. By doing so, they also would serve Gardner's mission of creating a salon where ideas about art could be shared.

Thus were born the gallery games. Now one of the most popular parts of *After Hours*, about 25% of all visitors in any one evening participate in these activities. Typically, visi-

tors receive four to five game cards with riddle-like instructions that necessitate exploring specific works of art located throughout the galleries. The content and phrasing of each direction provide food for thought and serve as simple conversation starters, as Figure 3 shows. One example: "Begin in the Titian Room and find a painting that depicts another work of art in it. Think a drawing within a painting." Then, when they find the correct item, volunteers stationed in the galleries give them a small token—Mardi Gras beads or stickers, for example—and often offer further insights into the work. If visitors locate all the pieces, there might be another small prize.

But the games also encourage intermingling among visitors. Often one group will strike up a conversation with another while searching for the right work of art. Frequently these interactions are built into the process. That's because moving on and completing the game may require exchanging cards with other visitors, who have instructions leading them to different works of art. Sometimes the interactions between guests are brief; at others the groups continue to explore together.

Ultimately, for the Gardner, the game is a form of low-pressure instruction in disguise. It's about teaching visitors how to understand art through visual examination, focusing on what they can observe, rather than relying on facts or dates. Lilly O'Flaherty, a twenty-one-year-old public programs assistant, sums it up this way: "The game teaches visitors about the collection in a way that's non-judgmental. People who are younger tend to feel if they don't understand a work of art, then they aren't eligible to talk about it. But Isabella Gardner didn't label the collection specifically so that people looked at the art first, without needing to know

Begin in the Dutch Room

Find the woman wearing an article of clothing that looks a little bit like one of those things you put on your dog to stop him from scratching.



**Figure 3. Gallery Games Clues with Corresponding Works of Art**

Frans Pourbus the Younger, *Portrait of Isabella Clara Eugenia, Archduchess of Austria*, about 1598–1600; courtesy of the Gardner Museum, Boston.

who painted it and when.”

**3) Live music.** Most *After Hours* events include a performance of jazz or classical music, in addition to music in the courtyard. Called *After Hours Plus*, it extends an earlier experimentation with Friday evening concerts in the early 2000s. These performances are also a natural extension of the Gardner experience; the Gardner has the longest-running museum music program in the United States. The concerts cost an additional \$11—regular *After Hours* admission is \$5 for students and \$12 for everyone else—and are held in the Tapestry Room on the second floor of the galleries, a space large enough to hold as many as 250 people.

**4) Group sketching.** To create another experience combining

Begin in the Titian Room

Find a painting that depicts another work of art in it.  
Think a drawing within a painting.



Baccio Bandinelli, *Self-Portrait*, about 1545–1550; courtesy of the Gardner Museum, Boston.

social interaction and artistic engagement, the staff places chairs in one of the galleries overlooking the courtyard, along with pads of paper and pencils for sketching, as Figure 4 shows. One volunteer is stationed there and sketches, inviting visitors to join in. Often groups of seven or more participate, turning something that’s usually a solitary activity into a group event.

**5) Gallery talks.** In addition, staff, volunteers, academics, or other experts give occasional talks designed to encourage discussion. These fifteen-minute talks focus on a small part of the collection or a special exhibition, allowing them to be conducted in one gallery, so that visitors may attend without being taken away from their social groups.

## 2. STAFFING—CREATING A CADRE OF NEW VOLUNTEERS

Making *After Hours* work was a labor-intensive effort, requiring not only adding paid staff, but also experimenting with a new type of program for volunteers. Specifically, the new paid and unpaid staff included:

**1) A programming assistant.** *After Hours* and its many components meant considerably more responsibilities for Gardner's public programming staff. To handle the extra work, the museum hired O'Flaherty as public programs assistant. A part-time position dedicated entirely to *After Hours*, its responsibilities are considerable: administrative support, helping to manage the event, coordinating volunteers, developing games, and producing game materials for 250 players.

**2) Volunteers.** The event requires about ten to twelve volun-



**Figure 4.**  
**Group Sketching in the Titian Room**

Photo by Bethany Versoy.  
Courtesy of the Gardner  
Museum, Boston.

teers helping out each evening in a variety of roles throughout the gallery: giving talks, staffing information tables, and assisting with other programming elements, such as the games and sketching. For Crites, their presence is critical to making the museum

more accessible to visitors. Many volunteers are stationed throughout the galleries wearing "Ask Me" buttons, serving as friendly guides able to answer ques-

tions about the museum and the collection. To find recruits, DePrizio, who manages the volunteer program, identified daytime volunteers who also wanted to offer their services on weekends and evenings.

**3) After Hours Ambassadors.** Over the first summer (2008), Crites and her team realized that, as they had grown the program to include more evenings and more talks, they had started to strain the resources of their volunteers. The answer was to supplement the group with people recruited specifically for *After Hours*. In fact, it offered an intriguing opportunity to tap previous *After Hours* visitors who not only represented the target demographic, but also could provide the Gardner with both an informal focus group and a source for additional ideas.

The upshot was to create a new group of volunteers called *After Hours* Ambassadors who work alongside ten to twelve general museum volunteers but with the added roles of facilitating discussion and drawing visitors into the collection. All from the targeted eighteen- to thirty-four-year-old

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**AFTER HOURS AMBASSADORS PROVIDE A PARTICULARLY ACCESSIBLE SOURCE OF INFORMATION, FORMING A SMALL CADRE OF PEOPLE WHOM VISITORS FEEL FREE TO APPROACH. "YOU WANT TO SEE YOURSELF REFLECTED IN THE VOLUNTEERS WHO ARE WORKING THERE," DEPRIZIO EXPLAINS.**

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demographic and former *After Hours* patrons themselves, they look like other attendees, but provide a particularly accessible source of information, forming a small cadre of people whom visitors feel free to approach with questions. “You want to see yourself reflected in the volunteers who are working there,” DePrizio explains.

Visitors encounter *After Hours* Ambassadors as soon as they walk in the door. Ambassadors take tickets and help with checking coats; they also staff a welcome table, where they distribute a museum map, a schedule of talks and performances, and information about the evening’s music programming and game. And they collect e-mail addresses in exchange for participation in a raffle. Plus, there’s a separate table dedicated only to the game, staffed by an Ambassador who hands out game cards and explains how the process works.

*After Hours* Ambassadors also are stationed in the larger galleries and throughout the museum, sometimes approaching visitors with comments aimed at striking up a conversation about the art, at other times simply serving as a resource for anyone with questions. Like well-attuned party hosts, they draw visitors out and make connections among people, while leaving alone those who seem happy exploring the collection on their own. They’re also important to making the games work, because they’re prepped with information about the specific works of art before each evening and hand out prizes to visitors who find the objects. According to Eric McCurdy, an *After Hours* Ambassador: “People are drawn to you because they want to know about the art.” Adds O’Flaherty, “We found that people pick up the game downstairs and they won’t necessarily play if they don’t find there are other visitors or volunteers in the gallery encouraging the playing.” To lend a helping hand, Crites often pairs Ambassadors

## DIFFERENT DISCUSSIONS DURING DAY AND NIGHT

**B**ecause the atmosphere at *After Hours* is informal, and casual conversation is encouraged, visitors ask museum staff and volunteers questions that are very different from those posed during the day. At night, the emphasis is on the collection as a whole and Isabella Gardner’s reasons for building it. During the day, questions are about specifics—“Who painted that? When?” “At night, the focus isn’t on the details; it’s on the environment and trying to get a broader sense of why things are laid out the way they are,” says DePrizio. Similarly, Jesse Needleman, who volunteers during the day and at *After Hours*, explains: “They’re not looking to see if Michelangelo did this painting and what year it was, they’re looking at this painting and trying to get an understanding of what was the mind-set of the person in the painting or why was it painted this way.”

All Gardner patrons, of course, have to make their way without information from labels (although information cards in the galleries provide details about each work). But, at night, because of the informal environment, visitors tend to feel more comfortable sharing ideas about the meaning of elements in particular works. *After Hours* Ambassador McCurdy recalls: “Upstairs in the Long Gallery, there are wooden seats that all sit next to each other, used for secular purposes for the religious establishment to sit in. Guests will ask each other, ‘What do you think these were?’ and they’ll speculate all sorts of things, like ‘Oh, I bet this was a punishment chair, or maybe it was French or French royalty because there’s a fleur-de-lis over there.’”

The implication: *After Hours* ultimately may be even more effective than the regular daytime experience at fostering the type of engagement Isabella Gardner intended—a direct relationship with a work of art based on personal reactions and exploration.

sadors with general volunteers, who usually have more experience working at the museum and can help Ambassadors answer visitors' questions.

Since their roles differ significantly from those of general volunteers, museum staff developed a unique selection and training system for Ambassadors. They're recruited from attendees who have also joined the *After Hours* Facebook page. Then, in interviews, museum staff look for people with an open, welcoming attitude. Training also is considerably less intensive—a one-evening orientation overview in which Crites presents information about *After Hours* and its audience, suggests reading material, such as essays about Isabella Gardner and the collection, and provides a sheet of frequently asked questions that visitors often have for review. Ambassadors also take part in Viewfinder talks as audience members. And on an ongoing basis, they participate in the Gardner Museum enrichment program. Created by DePrizio and her staff, it includes monthly lectures and programs, an introduction to the artist-in-residence program, or a discussion of other topics likely to deepen their understanding of the Gardner. Ultimately, training for *After Hours* Ambassadors focuses as much on showing volunteers how to help visitors to explore the art as on imparting facts.

It's a very different program from the training provided to daytime volunteers. That includes two full-day sessions covering duties, the collection, and visitor interaction. There's required homework, such as written assignments geared to listening to the audio museum guide, as well as other reading. The monthly commitment for daytime volunteers also is more than the Ambassadors' requirement—a minimum of six hours compared to just one evening for Ambassadors.

### 3. PROMOTING THE EVENT

**F**or its first year, museum staff knew publicizing the evening meant more than simply getting the word out to young adults in Boston. It had to signal that this was a significantly different program from anything previously undertaken at the museum and was aimed at a younger demographic—and to do so on a limited budget. That meant reaching new audiences and shaking up perceptions of the Gardner as an old-fashioned place frozen in time, while staying true to its identity.

To that end, Crites and her team developed a three-pronged strategy for pre-launch and the program's first year. First, they designed materials with provocative imagery in a different style from graphics used for previous museum promotions, but still consistent with what the Gardner represented. Second, they partnered with a marketing promotions company that created a multi-channel campaign aimed at the target audience. Finally, they experimented with social media and non-traditional approaches addressing young adults constantly on the go. Initially, there was a promotional blitz, aimed at the September 2007 launch. Then a sustained campaign was designed to keep the buzz going post-launch.

**1) New promotional material.** Creating the promotional campaign involved a sleight of hand: staying true to the Gardner's core, while emphasizing a more dynamic, "funkier" side. Key to the effort was striking imagery that would "frame the Gardner in a different way," in the words of Crites. Her first decision was to use a graphic image instead of photos of young adults attending wine tastings and other events at the Gardner. She feared that photographs would alienate potential visitors if they didn't see people they could identify with and, therefore, would conclude the event was not for them.

“We decided to create something where you see what you want, as opposed to showing an audience with people who might or might not appeal to potential visitors,” says Crites. “We wanted more of an inclusive message.”

To create the images, they commissioned Danijel Zezelj, a contemporary graphic artist who had been in residence at the Gardner in 2004 and, therefore, knew it well. As important, a graphic novel he’d produced titled *Stray Dogs* included a story, “Princess,” about the museum that made it clear he understood the edgier side of the Gardner. In particular, the piece included striking images depicting various views of the galleries. Says Crites: “It was connected to the Gardner, but still different, and that’s when we realized he was the perfect choice.” Zezelj’s work, like *After Hours*, combined Gardner’s artistic commitment with a younger audience’s sensibility. The staff had such confidence in his abilities, in fact, that when Pieranna Cavalchini, curator of contemporary art, commissioned the work, she agreed to accept whatever Zezelj created without any modification.

The imagery Zezelj ultimately produced had a light, contemporary feel depicting a woman in a dynamic pose. The black graphic image on an orange-and-red background stood in stark contrast to the more conventional photographs that had appeared in previous advertising for the museum, as shown in Figure 5 and Colorplate 3. And it would appear on all promotional material, from posters and T-shirts to postcards and stickers. What’s more, the image also could serve as a template for later promotions. The plan was for Zezelj to produce a new design and typeface every year that would share a family resemblance to previous *After Hours* images, but also feature graphics with a fresh look and feel.

**Figure 5. Samples of Marketing Material for the Gardner Museum and *After Hours***



Upper left: Landscape Visions Lecture Postcard. Courtesy of the Gardner Museum, Boston.

Lower middle: General Museum Postcard. Courtesy of the Gardner Museum, Boston.

Right: Illustration by Danijel Zezelj, 2007. Courtesy of the Gardner Museum, Boston.

**2) Traditional advertising.** Advertising was designed for a long-term campaign: raising awareness of *After Hours* through an initial marketing blitz and keeping the buzz going for nine months after the launch. Table 1 includes the Gardner’s advertising plan. With a limited budget of \$12,000, the museum partnered with the Phoenix Media Group, a company specializing in targeting young adults. Phoenix not only knew how to reach eighteen- to thirty-four-year-olds with a cultural bent, but it also owned several channels with a wide follow-



**Table 1. Advertising Plan**

<p><b>Pre-launch</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Two half-page ads in the <i>Boston Phoenix</i>, a weekly focusing on the alternative music and art scene</li><li>• One half-page ad in <i>Stuff@Night</i> (a Boston nightlife magazine) a week before the launch</li><li>• Twenty thirty-second spots on WFNX radio</li><li>• 250,000 banner impressions on thephoenix.com starting one month prior to the event launch</li><li>• A dedicated e-mail with a special offer to thephoenix.com subscribers</li></ul> <p><b>Post-launch, monthly from October–June</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• One quarter-page ad in the <i>Boston Phoenix</i></li><li>• One quarter-page ad in <i>Stuff@Night</i></li><li>• Five thirty-second spots on WFNX radio, one per week prior to each event</li><li>• 100,000 banner impressions on thephoenix.com</li><li>• One dedicated e-mail with special offers for thephoenix.com subscribers</li><li>• Production services for print ads and radio spots</li></ul>
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Source: Gardner Museum, Boston

ing among this group: the *Boston Phoenix* newspaper, a weekly focusing on the alternative music and art scene; *Stuff@Night*, a magazine about Boston nightlife; WFNX radio, an alternative rock station; and two websites, thephoenix.com and stuffboston.com. thephoenix.com’s subscriber list of 75,000, in particular, offered a gold mine of potential visitors.

In addition to that \$12,000 outlay, the staff allocated

about \$10,000 to advertising in such publications as *Improper Bostonian*, a glossy biweekly local culture and entertainment guide targeting young adults, and Boston.com, the *Boston Globe*’s website. And, they leveraged their own lists, including their members, an e-mail list of non-members who had signed up previously to receive information about the museum, and attendees of the Gardner’s concert series. They also tapped the Arts Boston Big List, a collaborative mailing list created by over forty arts organizations in the Greater Boston area, reaching more than 230,000 households. From that list, they pulled names and addresses of those under forty years old living in zip codes in the region—some up to fifty miles away—and sent them a postcard announcing *After Hours*’ opening as “A New Kind of Night Out.”

**3) E-mail, social media, and taking it to the street.** Since they were part of the target demographic, Crites and her colleagues mulled over not just which publications they turned to for news about events, but also how they tended to hear about goings-on. Those discussions led to additional promotional activity differing markedly from publicity for other museum activities, with an experimental mix of grassroots outreach, e-mail, social media, and texting.

- **Street teams** Before the event was launched, to encourage word-of-mouth referrals and create buzz, the Gardner experimented with “street teams.” Reaching young adults on the go, museum staff reasoned, required finding them en route. Working with the Phoenix Media Group, the staff enlisted small groups of young adults wearing T-shirts sporting the new *After Hours* graphic. They distributed promotional materials at high-traffic events frequented by younger residents, such as Red Sox games, Oktoberfest, and Boston Fashion Week after-

parties. Materials included “business cards” with information about *After Hours* and temporary tattoos depicting the new imagery.

Street teamers—undergraduate and graduate students receiving an hourly wage—worked solo or in small groups, depending on the size of the event, generally giving out 200 to 500 cards each time and asking café and shop owners in their assigned neighborhoods to display or hang posters. Their activities were coordinated by the Phoenix marketing staff. Armstrong also provided them with brief bullet points for messaging, presented in Table 2. Teams distributed cards at four events before the launch, then at four occasions between October and June of the following year.

- **E-mail campaigns** After the program launch, working with Convio, a marketing specialist for nonprofit organizations, Membership Manager Lynn Swain built a strategy to encourage ongoing interest in *After Hours*. First, they created a database of attendees at each event, offering eligibility for a free raffle for an iPod to visitors who provided their e-mail addresses; about 10 percent of attendees agreed to do so. Soon after the event, those visitors received an automated e-mail asking for their evaluation of the experience. Responses were reviewed by Swain, who then forwarded them to Crites for further informal analysis. Two weeks later, visitors received a notice about the next program and an offer for a reduced-price membership, also allowing free entry into *After Hours*, with a link to a sign-up form. And it included free admission for a friend to the next event. Those people also were added to the general *After Hours* list, and the next week they received another e-mail with information about upcoming pro-

**Table 2. Street Team Bullet Points**

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hey—check out a cool new evening event at the Gardner Museum</li> <li>• Art, music, cocktails, and more in Boston’s most enchanting setting</li> <li>• It’s called <i>Gardner After Hours</i> and is held the third Thursday of every month at the museum</li> <li>• Features live music—including DJs in the courtyard—and you can explore the galleries with friends, grab a drink, etc.</li> <li>• Plus, each month has a different theme, so there’s always something different going on</li> <li>• All for just the price of admission—\$12 and down, plus special discounts and offers available</li> <li>• Check it out—here or online at GardnerMuseum.org</li> </ul>
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Source: Gardner Museum, Boston

grams.

- **Social media** The team also tapped social media as another vehicle for steady communications. First, it created a Facebook *Gardner After Hours* group (now with more than 900 members) to provide a base for steady communications, including news about each month’s event. It also invited reviewers from the website Yelp.com to attend. Eleven reviews appeared within days after the launch, with nine giving it five out of five stars and two rating it four out of five, all with positive comments.

Using social media for publicity, of course, has a downside: organizations have little control over it. In fact, dozens of unsolicited reviews have appeared on Yelp. Most have been positive, but Gardner staff now monitor it and other sites to try to counter negative

comments. To that end, when the team finds unfavorable write-ups, it contacts reviewers, offering a free pass, hoping they'll return and have a better experience. Says Public Relations Director Armstrong, "People can say whatever they want on Yelp. We try to get them to come back and make it right."

- **Text-messaging** Gardner worked with G8wave, an affiliate of the Phoenix Media Group, to create text-messaging campaigns aimed both at building buzz and collecting cell-phone numbers. To subscribe, participants texted the word "Gardner" to a specific phone number. They then received an automatic response thanking them and providing a short overview of the series. After that, subscribers got a text message reminding them of the next event, with a special discount or offer. Table 3 includes two such messages. Once they arrived at the event, subscribers showed their text message to the admissions

**Table 3. Messages Used in Gardner's Text-Messaging Campaign**

<p><b>Launch, Sept. 20:</b> A new kind of night out, Gardner After Hours monthly evening events: cocktails, music, art and more in a Venetian-inspired setting. Launch event 9/20 5-9PM. \$5-\$12. Show this txt 4 \$2 off.</p> <p><b>Oct. 2007:</b> A new kind of nite out, Gardner After Hrs monthly events: cocktails, music, art &amp; more in an enchanting setting. 10/18 5-9PM \$5-\$12. Show this txt for free limited edition poster by artist Danijel Zezelj.</p>
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Source: Gardner Museum, Boston

desk to receive that evening's special offer.

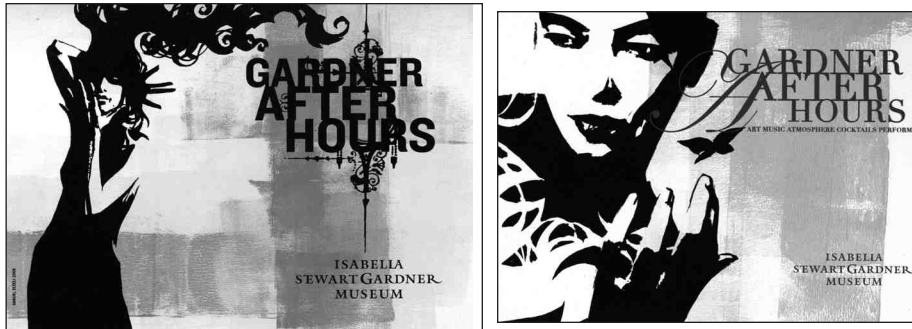
In the first three months, close to 120 cell-phone numbers were collected, with a typical response rate of about twenty per event. But, because e-mail proved to be more productive, Gardner ended the texting campaign after the second year, focusing on collecting e-mail addresses instead.

On the whole, the Gardner's promotional strategy during the first year did the trick, attracting big crowds to every event. Ultimately, however, it's impossible to pinpoint the effectiveness of each element in the campaign: the team hasn't measured the impact of individual tactics.

**4) Ongoing promotions.** Since the first year, to keep the promotions fresh, the Gardner has continued its advertising campaign, always with a new graphic that retains the same edgy look and feel as in earlier years, as shown in Figure 6 and Colorplate 4. Since fall 2010, with awareness established, the campaign has been conducted on a smaller scale, but Armstrong and her colleagues remain committed to building more buzz for *After Hours* through creative outreach and advertising. The staff realizes its target market is fickle and, to keep the event top-of-mind, promotional activities can't stop.

To that end, they still advertise in Boston's key print publications, including two ads each month in the *Improper Bostonian* and Boston's *Weekly Dig*, which cater to culturally connected young adults. The partnership with Phoenix Media Group continues to provide an efficient way to reach the target audience. Now with a budget of \$4,000, *After Hours* print ads appear twice monthly in *Stuff@Night* and the *Boston Phoenix* (for a total of sixteen ads over the fall season's four months) and ad rotations appear online on thephoenix.com

Figure 6. Marketing Material for *After Hours* in Years 2 and 3



Year 2

Year 3

Illustrations by Danijel Zezelj, 2008 and 2009. Courtesy of the Gardner Museum, Boston.

and stuffboston.com.

Street teams also continue to publicize the event. In fact, one component of the fall 2010 media sponsorship with the Phoenix Media Group included two teams. One was stationed outside the Charles Street “T” station, a heavily traveled location in downtown Boston, leading up to the September 2010 event. Additionally, a team was placed in Harvard Square during Oktoberfest; it also inserted a total of 16,000 *After Hours* posters into print editions of the *Boston Phoenix* in key target neighborhoods close to the museum.

In addition, the Gardner continues to promote *After Hours* through the social networks already created online, in a monthly e-newsletter, and through other low-cost grass-roots initiatives, such as dropping posters and postcards at local cafés. There’s also a new effort targeting concierges at more than twenty high-end hotels in the Greater Boston area, although the tactic could attract more tourists than local followers.

## RESULTS

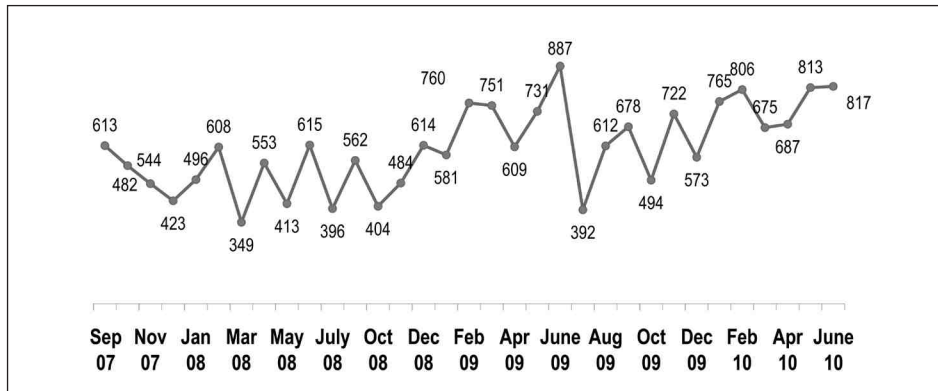
**A**ttendance data and results of visitor surveys paint a clear picture: *After Hours* has been a success, attracting an increasing number of young adults to the event, while also encouraging those visitors to engage with the collection. Guided by Isabella Gardner’s vision, the staff has created a social event fostering exploration and interaction, and even subtly teaching visitors a new way to experience art.

### 1. ATTENDANCE AND INTEREST AMONG YOUNG ADULTS HAVE INCREASED

**F**irst, consider the matter of attendance levels, which increased substantially over time as word of mouth grew and more evenings were added. In the first year, the event attracted audiences of around 500 visitors to most of the ten evenings it held—there were no programs in July and August—for a total attendance of 5,096, as Figure 7 shows. In the second year, the average number of visitors per event increased 21% to 616 attendees. Partly because an evening was added in July, the total audience reached 6,779, up 33% for the year. In the third year, with an additional event in August, there were 8,034 visitors, with an average 670 attending per evening. Attendance now regularly exceeds 700, reaching more than 800 in recent evenings.

Results also show a preponderance of young visitors who enjoy the event and would recommend it. Exit surveys were con-

**Figure 7. Attendance at *After Hours***



Source: Gardner Museum, Boston

ducted in the first two fell into the targeted eighteen- to thirty-four-year-old demographic.

In addition:

- 75% of visitors (and 72% of visitors aged eighteen to thirty-four) were “extremely likely to recommend” the program to a friend—a critical factor for a group for whom word of mouth is a key source of information about events.
- 78% of eighteen- to thirty-four-year-olds who had never visited the Gardner said that the *After Hours* program made them “more interested” in coming during regular hours.
- 12% of surveyed visitors in 2007–2008 had been to a previous *After Hours* event compared to 25% the next year, indicating an increase in repeat visitors.

## 2. NEW MEMBERSHIP HAS RISEN

The Gardner also has recruited 241 new members in the program’s first three years: 51 in the first year, 104 in the second, and 86 in the third. Of all new members, 235 signed up at the event and six joined through follow-up e-mail activity. *After Hours* visitors now make up a significant and growing portion (7%) of the 3,300 museum memberships at the museum. “*After Hours* has been a tremendous acquisition tool,” says Swain. And it has allowed the museum to tap into a demographic that has been traditionally underrepresented in memberships at not only the Gardner, but other institutions nationwide, as well.

## 3. VISITORS ARE ENGAGED BY THE ART

Table 4 shows further results from exit surveys conducted during *After Hours* events. Those surveys reveal that *After Hours* is much more than a social event. Some 89% of visitors explored the galleries in the first year, and 93% did so in the second. Compare those results to the percentage that visited the courtyard bar—66% in 2007–2008 vs. 69% the next year. More than half, 52%, say exploring the galleries is the activity they enjoy the most.

## 4. DAYTIME AND *AFTER HOURS* VISITORS HAVE DIFFERENT CHARACTERISTICS

Recent (2008–2009) visitor surveys reveal a significant contrast between daytime and *After Hours* visitors. The most notable is the difference in age. In 2008–2009, 39% of daytime visitors were eighteen- to thirty-four years old compared to 67% at *After Hours* events in 2007–2008 and 73% in 2008 to

**Table 4. Results from After Hours Exit Surveys<sup>1</sup>**

	2007–2008 (n=593)	2008–2009 (n=394)
<b>Activities</b>		
Visited the galleries	89%*	93%
Sketched in the galleries	9%	11%
Visited the special exhibition	N/A	19%
Visited the courtyard bar	66%	69%
<b>Age</b>		
18–34 years old	66%	73%
18–24	22%	30%
25–34	45%	43%
34–55 years old	24%	20%
55+ years old	8%	7%
Extremely likely to recommend to a friend	71%	75%
Came on own	8%	13%
Came with friends	81%	81%
Been to the Gardner Museum before	62%	61%
Been to <i>After Hours</i> before	12%	25%
Member of the museum	11%	15%
Local (“live or work in the area”)	72%	N/A

\*Not asked the first month (September 2007)

Source: Gardner Museum, Boston

1. Exit surveys were administered to exiting visitors at seven of the ten *After Hours* events the first year, and six of the eleven *After Hours* events the second year. The percentage of visitors completing the survey in any given evening ranged from 12% to 23% of all visitors the first year and 5% to 14% of all visitors during the second year. More detail on the exit survey can be found later in the “Why It Worked” section.

2009. In addition, many more locals attended *After Hours* (72% in 2007–2008) than visited the museum during the day (28% in 2008–2009). And just 3% of daytime visitors were members in 2008–2009 vs. 15% of *After Hours* attendees. These results suggest the evening is seeing more repeat visitors. And, surprisingly, the number of visitors to *After Hours* who see the galleries (93% in year 2) is even higher than during the daytime (87%; the museum has other attractions that include its atmospheric courtyard and café).

Still, while results show that the museum has leveraged the event to sign up new members, this has never been an explicit goal for the program. In fact, there’s been no overt strategy to convert *After Hours* attendees to members. Similarly, the Gardner hasn’t focused on tracking how many *After Hours* visitors become daytime attendees. For Gardner staff, the crucial objective isn’t signing on members but putting a contemporary spin on Isabella Gardner’s vision by encouraging more young adults to visit the museum.

That’s also an approach the Gardner staff believes is born of realism. “People are busy and have a multitude of interests, even if they’re interested in culture. If they come to *After Hours* a couple of times a year, or even just once, or if their parents come to town and they think, ‘Hey, let’s go to the Gardner,’ that’s great,” says Crites.

## WHY IT WORKED

**T**he Gardner’s strategy included multiple programming elements, a wide range of promotional activities, and enlisting a new type of volunteer. But those factors were only one part of the puzzle. Perhaps more important is why they were so successful. Most notable were the following elements:

### 1. REMOVING PRACTICAL AND PERCEPTUAL BARRIERS

**T**he museum’s most basic change was to hold the event in the evening, to allow visitors to attend after work. Before *After Hours*, entrance to the museum was limited to 11 a.m. to 5 p.m., Tuesday through Sunday. But Crites recognized that those hours were not times when young adults tended to go out, and they limited the number of potential attendees. While holding the event in the evening addressed an important practical barrier stopping visitors already predisposed to attend from participating in *After Hours*, it was unlikely to bring in new audiences. As Kevin P. McCarthy and Kimberly Jinnett concluded in their landmark 2001 analysis, *A New Framework for Building Participation in the Arts*,<sup>6</sup> reaching entirely new audiences requires overcoming perceptual barriers that keep people from coming.

6. Kevin P. McCarthy and Kimberly Jinnett, *A New Framework for Building Participation in the Arts* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2001, <http://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/audience-development-for-the-arts/key-research/Documents/New-Framework-for-Building-Participation-in-the-Arts.pdf>), 32.

According to Curator of Education Burchenal, there were two particularly formidable perceptual barriers. One was the view that the museum was a thing of the past, too frozen in time to be of interest to young adults looking for a social event. The other was the fear that, were they to attend, attendees would risk looking stupid because they were not habitual museumgoers or art history experts. Central to the strategy, then, was turning those perceptions around through edgy promotions, use of young, approachable volunteers, a fun party, and programming encouraging informal interaction and exploration of the galleries. “With *After Hours*, we’re trying to show people that there are a lot of ways to experience art,” says Burchenal.

### 2. CREATING AN EXPERIENCE ROOTED IN THE ORGANIZATION’S MISSION

**T**he event’s ambitious goals are directly linked to the museum’s core philosophy: to help people engage with and have a personal connection to art. Because it originated in the Education Division—Crites reports to Burchenal—programming is built around instructional objectives. But as they developed those initiatives, Visitor Learning, curatorial staff, and Program Planning staff all also were guided by a clear and passionate sense of the organization’s vision, a clarity that guided their decision making. Director of Visitor Learning DePrizio, for example, describes her objective as helping people to connect directly to what they see at the Gardner, whether it’s a specific painting or Isabella Gardner’s reasons for placing a work of art in a particular place. In fact, staff members invoke the Gardner philosophy frequently in conversations, noting the creative connections between historic and contemporary approaches to art ideas. It’s a commitment driven by Hawley, Burchenal, and other senior staff, who set the tone

for the rest of the organization.

Some idiosyncratic features of the museum also have helped build an atmosphere of exploration and inquisitiveness. Most important, the staff believes the lack of labeling naturally contributes to an environment in which visitors want to exchange ideas about the collection.

Because *After Hours* and all of its elements are so directly rooted in Isabella Gardner's fundamental mission, there's a distinctively authentic feel to the event. By staying true to the Gardner's mission, Crites and her colleagues created a unique experience, one that cannot be duplicated by other organizations. According to Pine and Gilmore,<sup>7</sup> such authenticity can contribute significantly to a program's success—helping museums to differentiate themselves and attract more visitors. "Museums have always been an experience," write Pine and Gilmore. "Today, however, they compete with every other experience out there for the time, attention and money of individuals, whether consumers, guests or patrons. ... Museums must therefore learn to understand, manage, and excel at *rendering authenticity*."

The Gardner could have attempted to attract younger adults with programming that was not rooted in the museum's mission or collection, such as inviting rock bands or improvisational artists who might appeal to this audience but have no real connection to the museum. However, in designing *After Hours*, the Gardner adhered to what Pine and Gilmore define as a key dimension of authenticity—being true to one's own self. That means understanding "what you really are as a museum—specifically taking into account the essence of your enterprise; the nature of your artifacts, edifices and encounters; the effects of your heritage; your sense of purpose; and your body of values—

7. B. Joseph Pine II and James H. Gilmore, "Museums and Authenticity," *Museum News* 86 (2007): 76–80, <http://www.aam-us.org/pubs/mn/authenticity.cfm>.

and then ensure that everything you do coincides with this identity." And because that identity guided all *After Hours* program development, its different elements created a coherent, engaging experience, what Pine and Gilmore call "a unified story line that wholly captivates the customer." It's sufficiently captivating, in fact, to help the Gardner keep the attention of a somewhat fickle younger adult audience and potentially build an emotional connection with the museum that lasts beyond one night.

The bottom line: It's essential to find the common ground between what an organization stands for and a particular audience wants. "Know your brand and what you are about and use that," says Armstrong.

### 3. MAKING SURE THE TARGET DEMOGRAPHIC WAS REPRESENTED AMONG PLANNERS AND VOLUNTEERS

**A**lthough senior staffers provided counsel throughout, they turned responsibility for the event—programming, promotions, budget, and staffing—over to younger colleagues. For Burchenal, only young staffers belonging to the targeted age group could understand how to appeal to that demographic. She persuaded Hawley that Crites should have control over how to allocate resources and be allowed to experiment, to play the role of big-picture thinker. Hawley's imprimatur, in turn, also played a vital part in building support among staff, allowing young staffers to operate with little interference.

That autonomy had other benefits, as well. It allowed the team to create an experience with a strong point of view, not a more diffuse program developed by committee. Also, because staffers knew their ideas had a good chance of being tried out, they felt motivated to keep tweaking the event; that sense of empowerment continues to inspire them to make more improve-



ments. And, it encouraged creative and out-of-the-box thinking, resulting in an effective mix of traditional and non-traditional marketing techniques.

Specifically, Crites and her colleagues developed their initial approach by analyzing their own experiences and those of their friends. Thanks to their brainstorming, they came up with everything from event elements—having younger volunteers stationed throughout the museum, for example—to marketing methods catering to their own demographic’s lifestyle. Then they combined those insights with the qualitative research conducted by outside consultants described earlier.

The presence of younger volunteers—the *After Hours* Ambassadors—also played an important part in the program’s success. Social psychology research has demonstrated robustly that people feel inhibited in situations not usually associated with their social group (e.g., women in mathematics), leading them to avoid those situations.<sup>8</sup> But their confidence level increases when they see others like themselves assuming key roles in those settings.<sup>9</sup> For that reason, young adults who may feel less inclined to visit a museum or other artistic venue because it’s not often frequented by members of their demographic group may feel less

8. Claude M. Steele, Steven J. Spencer, and Joshua Aronson, “Contending with Group Image: The Psychology of Stereotype and Social Identity Threat,” in *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology Volume 34*, ed. Mark P. Zanna (San Diego: Academic Press, 2002), 379–440; see also Diane M. Quinn, Rachel W. Kallen, and Steven J. Spencer, “Stereotype Threat,” in *The Sage Handbook of Prejudice, Stereotyping, and Discrimination*, eds. John F. Dovidio, Miles Hewstone, Peter Glick, Victoria M. Esses (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2010), 379–394. Steele and his colleagues provide a broad review of how and when people underperform in or avoid domains not associated with their social group; Quinn and her colleagues review diverse studies demonstrating that this underperformance and avoidance impact a wide array of groups and domains.

9. David M. Marx, Diederik A. Stapel, and Dominique Muller, “We Can Do It: The Interplay of Construal Orientation and Social Comparison Under Threat,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 88 (2005): 432–446; David M. Marx and Jasmin S. Roman, “Female Role Models: Protecting Women’s Math Test Performance,” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 28 (2002): 1,183–1,193.

intimidated when they see volunteers of their own age. Similarly, organizations looking to attract audiences from different demographic or social groups might improve their chances for success by following the *After Hours* Ambassador model, where volunteers from the target market are not only on hand to help out, but also are an integral part of the experience itself.

#### 4. HAVING A COMMITMENT TO A PROCESS OF CONTINUAL IMPROVEMENT

**A**fter Hours was not an overnight success. Attendance figures reveal a program that started slowly and built momentum over time. By constantly observing how visitors were engaging with the art and one another and combining those insights with data from exit surveys and objective research, Crites and her team were able to make effective improvements and continue to do so even in the event’s third year.

**1) Changes in programming and logistical elements.** Although the first few evenings were well attended, museum staff saw room to grow the programming to give visitors more ways to connect with one another and the collection. The initial event included two Viewfinder talks, along with a self-guided tour—a programming element that later was eliminated—two brief discussions in the galleries, a butoh dance performance, and sketching. But, the Viewfinder talks were filled to room capacity of twenty-five, so that many visitors couldn’t hear or participate. Others were kept out by security staff, who were concerned about overcrowding in the small gallery that housed the portrait of Isabella Gardner.

In response, Crites expanded the talks to four a night; a month later, she added two more. Also, she put a size limit on

the groups to about fifteen, based on the daytime tour capacity number previously determined by education, conservation, and security staff. It's a size that allows other visitors to be in the gallery at the same time, while also ensuring the group is small enough to encourage participation. Now, there still are six talks per evening that generally fill to capacity and spark lively conversation.

That, by far, wasn't the only programming element Crites retooled or replaced. Take the self-guided tours, which were used in the first few months of programming. Designed to help visitors explore the collection, they were tours in written form that differed each month and were tied to the evening's theme. But, while visitors tended to carry the information sheets around, Crites noticed that they paid little attention to the material as they explored the museum. She first thought the type was too hard to read in the evening light of the Gardner. But after having it enlarged, she observed that visitors still seemed to disregard the information. Just as she started looking for substitute programming, she learned from the in-depth interview research with visitors that they wanted to meet new people at *After Hours*. Thanks to that insight and the desire to rework the self-guided tour, she developed the gallery games.

Like much of *After Hours* programming, the development of the gallery games involved a mix of experimentation, ingenuity, and a willingness to fail. As Crites states, "When we've added things, we never know if it's going to work. When I thought about doing that first game, I thought, 'Let's see.' The galleries are challenging, working things out with conservation and security can be challenging. Hopefully it will work." At the first event, visitors were given Mardi Gras-style

bead necklaces for each correctly identified work of art, in part to allow Crites to discern who was playing. "So many people in the galleries were wearing one to four necklaces, you could see it was working," says Crites. Now, she looks for stacks of used game cards as well as exit surveys for evidence of participation levels.

Perhaps the key consideration in any programming change has been the effect on the visitor experience. For example, at one point, the team considered introducing name tags. But, Crites says, "I decided against it, because that makes it like a networking or singles event. Even if you make name tags optional, it signals something too strong." According to Crites, they also brainstormed about other approaches, such as giving visitors name cards including a picture of a work of art that could be traded with other people and might trigger conversation. But, she says, "It seemed too heavy-handed. With the game now, you can interact with other people or with the staff, and you can engage or not, depending on what you're coming for."

Other efforts were tried and then stopped when they didn't work out. During the second year, for example, the staff experimented with a version of "Ask the Gardener," modeled after a popular daytime program at the museum, during which a member of the horticulture staff spends an hour discussing the plants in the courtyard. Crites first tried to follow the same format but discovered that the courtyard area, the hub of social activities, was too busy. Plus, visitors had trouble identifying the appropriate staff member. Next, she moved the program upstairs to a room overlooking the courtyard. But, after six nights, it became clear there was just too much noise and too little interest. The program was halted.

There were logistical problems as well during the first few *After Hours* events. Visitors had to stand in one line to buy a ticket for a drink and another actually to get it. In the dim light of the courtyard, seeing just what was going on was difficult; many frustrated visitors ended up standing in the wrong line, only to be told they needed to go back again and buy a ticket. After some experimentation, the team finally decided to shorten the lines by creating two bars. Additionally, Crites noticed that few people arrived before 6 p.m., although the event began at 5 p.m. That left just three hours to explore the galleries and enjoy the palazzo. She therefore changed the hours to start and end a half hour later, to fit the work schedules of visitors better.

**2) Current approach to continual improvement.** Now Crites uses a mix of formal and informal tools to monitor *After Hours* and ensure a positive visitor experience.<sup>10</sup> Mostly, staff walk around the museum during the event, observing what is and isn't working, always looking for ways to encourage visitors to engage even more with the art and one another, and other tactics for enhancing the experience. Crites also regularly debriefs staff members and Ambassadors, who have what she calls a "boots on the ground" perspective, focusing on what needs to be done differently. She found it was necessary to do this much more often during the first three months of *After Hours*, when she led a session every Tuesday that included the

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10. In this regard, Crites and the Gardner staff follow several tenets of what has become known as customer experience management. Successful customer experience management is based on delivering a strong experience that resonates with what visitors are looking for and with well-defined organizational values. The process involves continually acquiring customer feedback to ensure the experience fits both with visitor tastes and the organization's mission. See, for example, Shaun Smith and Joe Wheeler, *Managing the Customer Experience: Turning Customers into Advocates* (London: Financial Times Press, 2002).

café manager, security guards, visitor services and membership staffs, and the concert manager. Now, these debriefings occur less formally and often in response to problems Crites hears about or sees at an event.

More formally, during the first two years of *After Hours*, Crites used exit surveys, as shown in Figure 8, administered by volunteers, as an evaluation tool. Visitors got posters, temporary *After Hours* tattoos, or other small gifts as incentives. The surveys were administered to guests as they left the event on seven of the ten *After Hours* the first year and six of the eleven events the second year. They were modified each time to fit the evening's programming.

More recently, the staff temporarily suspended the surveys, in large part because volunteers found them difficult to administer. In fact, without constant monitoring by O'Flaherty or Crites, volunteers tended to get busy with other duties and simply forget about attending to the questionnaire. Plus, the exit area is small and often packed with visitors waiting in a long coat-check line. As a result, finding room to conduct the surveys proved to be a challenge. But, recognizing the value of the feedback they provide, in the fall of 2010, Crites decided to introduce a substitute—surveys to be conducted in the galleries by an intern rather than volunteers.

Even with all the improvements to the event, the team isn't home free. Museum staff still face a number of challenges, most of them unanticipated results of *After Hours*' success. For example, there's a limited number of security guards, who also work a day shift from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. The larger crowd at *After Hours* means additional pressure to ensure that visitors don't bring drinks into the galleries or

## A NEW, YOUNGER VOLUNTEER

**V**olunteers for *After Hours* have come from a combination of Ambassadors and younger volunteers selected from the museum volunteer pool, the latter of whom go through a more extensive museum volunteer training program than Ambassadors. The event is on hiatus as the Gardner prepares to open a new wing in January 2012. When it starts up again in 2012, it will be staffed only by those younger museum volunteers. The *After Hours* Ambassadors program as it currently exists will end. The Ambassador program has been critical to the success of *After Hours*, but Crites believes that those who receive the more extensive museum volunteer training are better equipped to make visitors feel welcome, and to encourage dialogue and questions about the museum and collection.

The original *After Hours* Ambassadors training focused less on deep museum knowledge and more on encouraging a visitor-focused attitude. Museum staff (and the Ambassadors themselves) saw the limitations of that training as the programming evolved to encourage deeper exploration of the collection. Crites explains:

*The qualities we looked for in After Hours volunteers evolved to include the qualities that a traditional museum volunteer at the Gardner would possess. Because Ambassadors were not put through the same training program as our “regular” museum volunteers, we actually weren’t putting them in a position to be as successful as they could be. When we added the games in February 2009 and asked the Ambassadors to help facilitate those games in the galleries, [Public Programs Assistant] Lilly O’Flaherty and I could clearly see that some were more comfortable in the galleries facilitating*

*the game than others. Ambassadors that were not as comfortable were simply not as outgoing and might just say, “Hello, are you playing the game? Here’s your next card” rather than engaging visitors by asking something like “What’s your guess? Great! Do you want to know something interesting about this object?” and only then moving on to the next steps in the game. Our more successful Ambassadors were the ones who had already gone through the regular volunteer training and had developed more personal interest in the Gardner. This led us to invite some of the Ambassadors to train in our museum volunteer program in 2009–2010.*

She’s quick to add, however, that the Ambassador program was the right thing to do when the program first started, because it allowed the Gardner to introduce a younger volunteer into the event when they traditionally had not targeted that demographic for their volunteer base:

*The Ambassador approach was a great idea for where the museum was at the time. When we launched in the fall of 2007, we did not have a lot of volunteers in the demographic who could work nights. During the first year, we had some volunteer fatigue with the small pool of existing volunteers who could and would work an evening program. By the fall of 2008 when we started the Ambassadors, we really needed some volunteers who were in the target demographic. By the fall of 2009 we were using a combination of regular museum volunteers and Ambassadors for After Hours events; by the fall of 2010, I was beginning to wonder if we should continue with the Ambassador program given that we now had a much more robust museum volunteer group (including many younger volunteers) to staff from.*

**ISABELLA  
STEWART GARDNER  
MUSEUM**

**Exit Survey**

**How did you hear about tonight's program?**  
(Please check all that apply)

- After Hours poster
- After Hours text message
- Email from museum
- Facebook / Yelp / Going (circle one)
- Museum's website
- Other websites: \_\_\_\_\_
- Newspaper/Magazine
- Someone I know told me about it
- While visiting the museum

**How likely would you be to recommend After Hours to a friend or colleague?** (Please check one)

- Extremely likely to recommend
- Somewhat likely to recommend
- Neither likely nor unlikely to recommend
- Somewhat unlikely to recommend
- Extremely unlikely to recommend

**What made you say you would either recommend or not recommend After Hours?**

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**How did you spend your time here?**  
(Please check all that apply)

- Explored the galleries
- Visited the special exhibition "Modeling Devotion: Terracotta Sculpture of the Italian Renaissance"
- Attended the *Avant Gardner* concert in the Tapestry Room
- Played the "Night / Day" gallery game
- Participated in a *Viewfinder* gallery talk
- Visited the courtyard bar
- Ate in the Gardner Café
- Sketched in the galleries

**What did you enjoy the most?**  
(Please circle items listed above)

**Have you been to the Gardner Museum before?**  
 Yes  No

**Have you been to After Hours before?**  
 Yes  No

**Please tell us about yourself:**

Gender  Male  Female  Do not identify

Age  18-20  21-24  25-34  
 35-44  45-54  55-64  
 65+

If you are a student, what college/university do you attend?

\_\_\_\_\_

**Ethnicity**

- African American/Black
- Asian/Pacific Islander
- Hispanic/Latino
- Mixed Ethnicity \_\_\_\_\_
- Other \_\_\_\_\_
- White/Caucasian

**Who are you visiting with tonight?**

- I came on my own
- I'm here with friends (# of people in group, including yourself) \_\_\_\_\_
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

**Are you a member of the museum?**

- Yes (individual/dual member)  No
- Yes (your college/university is a member)

**Join the After Hours list:**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Email: \_\_\_\_\_

Cell (to receive text alerts and deals): \_\_\_\_\_

Mailing Address: \_\_\_\_\_

put them down in the wrong spot. Coat check can be filled to capacity and visitors sometimes have to wait outside for up to thirty minutes, even on cold winter nights. Even the *After Hours* Ambassadors, an early key to success, have been reconsidered and will be replaced by a new group of volunteers (see sidebar, *A New, Younger Volunteer*). The lesson for Crites is clear. "The program still needs care and feeding," she says. "You can't rest on your laurels."

**Figure 8. After Hours Exit Survey, March 2008**

## GOING FORWARD: MAKING GARDNER AFTER HOURS SUSTAINABLE

Crites and her team have managed to cut costs considerably since the event was launched. And, they've been able to become significantly less reliant on contributed income. The path to self-sufficiency is not totally clear, but the program is moving toward being run with minimal outside financial support.

### 1. COSTS

Costs were high in the first two years, thanks to heavy marketing for the launch and frequent experimentation with programming. Outside support (provided by The Wallace Foundation) was essential. Now, however, the staff is reducing costs, with the objective of making the evening self-sufficient eventually. Of course, that requires bringing expenses in line with revenues, which are outlined in Table 5. Many of the program costs are fixed, such as salaries for security guards and an *After Hours* programming assistant. Others, including music, marketing, and market research, are not. As the event has built momentum, Crites and her team have cut these variable costs in a few critical ways, bringing the first year's budget of \$180,369 for ten *After Hours* evenings, to \$163,611 in the second year of eleven events, to approximately \$95,000 in the most recent year (which had

twelve events), as the bottom half of Table 5 shows.

Two elements were particularly important to the Gardner's cost-cutting efforts:

- **Reducing paid advertising.** As *After Hours* moved into its third year, Gardner staff believed that enough time had passed for word of mouth to reach a critical mass and believed it was even more effective than advertising. In fact, as data from FY10 shows, attendance has increased, in spite of reductions in the marketing budget.
- **Finding new programming partners.** Gardner reduced the music programming budget for *After Hours Plus* by partnering with the Callithumpian Consort through the New England Conservatory, located in Boston. That entailed a considerably smaller travel budget than for musicians from outside the area they had used in the first two years' programming.

Thanks to these cuts, costs per visitor have decreased to \$11.84 in the 2009–2010 fiscal year, down from \$24.13 in 2008–2009 and \$34.49 for the first year.

### 2. PROGRAM SUPPORT AND REVENUES

In the beginning, *After Hours* relied heavily on the Wallace Excellence Award, which accounted for nearly two-thirds of the funds required to support the program. Admission fees and tickets to musical performances made up most of the rest. Any shortfall had to be taken out of the museum's operating budget. Over time, revenue sources have shifted considerably, as shown in the top half of Table 5.

In addition to a 50% increase in revenue from admissions, one particularly notable change was in the amount of money generated by corporate sponsorships. The museum arranged for

**Table 5. Revenue and Expenses per Year**

<b>Revenue:</b>	<b>FY08</b>	<b>FY09</b>	<b>FY10</b>
Admissions	\$22,564	\$26,377	\$35,233
<i>After Hours Plus</i> Concert Tickets	\$23,738	\$18,308	\$18,590
Wallace Award	\$115,066	\$78,436	\$36,000
Other Grants	\$15,000	\$40,000	\$5,000
Total Revenue	<u>\$176,368</u>	<u>\$163,121</u>	<u>\$94,823</u>
<b>Expenses:</b>	<b>FY08</b>	<b>FY09</b>	<b>FY10</b>
Direct Staffing/Programming	\$44,273	\$52,661	\$52,622
<i>After Hours Plus</i> Concerts	\$70,030	\$67,798	\$26,814
Marketing	\$56,498	\$43,152	\$15,680
Research	\$9,568	0	0
Total Expenses	<u>\$180,369</u>	<u>\$163,611</u>	<u>\$95,116</u>
Net Revenue (Loss)	<u>\$(4,001)</u>	<u>\$(490)</u>	<u>\$(293)</u>

Source: Gardner Museum, Boston

a large investment group in the Boston area to sponsor the *After Hours* held in June 2008; in exchange, the firm's employees were admitted for free that evening. Since that time, with budgets tighter because of the economic downturn (and an increased tendency to avoid sponsoring events providing employee entertainment), companies have cut back on such programs. The Gardner is now working on a more traditional corporate support model and had two grants in the 2008–2009 year, one for \$5,000 and the other for \$35,000, and another in 2010 for \$5,000.

Such outside support will likely be necessary to maintain the program; it's filled to capacity now and probably will not generate additional money from concert tickets or admission fees. The revenue from those two areas covers fixed staffing costs, but doesn't pay for concert performers or any marketing or research expenditures. What's more, the museum doesn't make any money from food and drinks sold during the event; that's handled by an independent contractor also running the in-house café.

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

**A**fter Hours has achieved its objectives—building a popular evening program attracting more young adult visitors who not only have a good time but also engage with the art. As an added benefit, the museum has signed up more members from an underrepresented demographic group.

Still, some questions remain. Should the Gardner be doing more to encourage greater involvement with the museum through daytime visits or other engagement? And should museum staff try to assess what happens down the line? For example, is the experience of attending *After Hours* only successful in encouraging participation for one or a few evenings, or does it lead to further arts participation in other areas?

For arts organizations interested in expanding participation to young adults, the *After Hours* experience raises some other important questions:

- Young adults are looking for novelty, not “same old, same old.” Can you leverage your organization’s brand, art form, or other resources to appeal to young adults in a new, refreshing way? In a similar vein, *Gardner After Hours* changes the theme every month. How can you keep your program fresh over time?
- Do you have the leeway to experiment with the program as it develops, recognizing that hitting on a winning formula will take time, and some failures could very well be

part of the learning process?

- The Gardner’s marketing and research expenditures leading up to the event and through its first year were heavy. Because the program was a start-up and designed for new audiences, these expenses were critical to building awareness of the program and aligning it with the interests of its target demographic. Does your organization have the resources to fund such an effort, or can it secure them?
- Do you have an adequate understanding of the young adult market you want to reach—and are you willing to listen to the people on staff likely to understand that demographic?
- Reaching young adults may require using social media and other forms of word of mouth. Is your organization able to tap into networks of young adults, or partner with another organization that can?
- Are there opportunities to reach out to young adult volunteers who share your passion for your organization?



## ABOUT THE LEAD AUTHOR

**B**ob Harlow, PhD, develops custom research programs that help organizations identify how their brands, offerings, and messages intersect with what matters most to their target audiences. 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. He has partnered with marketing managers and senior executives at some of the world's largest companies and leading nonprofit organizations to build brands, target offerings, and design effective communications supporting them.

Bob has written hundreds of surveys and conducted hundreds of focus groups and interviews with broad audiences in thirty countries. He has more than a dozen scholarly publications in social psychology and research methods. 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. He speaks English, Spanish, French, and Portuguese.

**Colorplate 1. After Hours Party**



Photo by Derek Kouyoumjian; Courtesy of the Gardner Museum, Boston



**Colorplate 2. Viewfinder Talk on John Singer Sargent Portrait of Isabella Stewart Gardner**

Photo by Derek Kouyoumjian. Courtesy of the Gardner Museum, Boston.

**Colorplate 3. Samples of Marketing Material for the Gardner Museum and *After Hours***

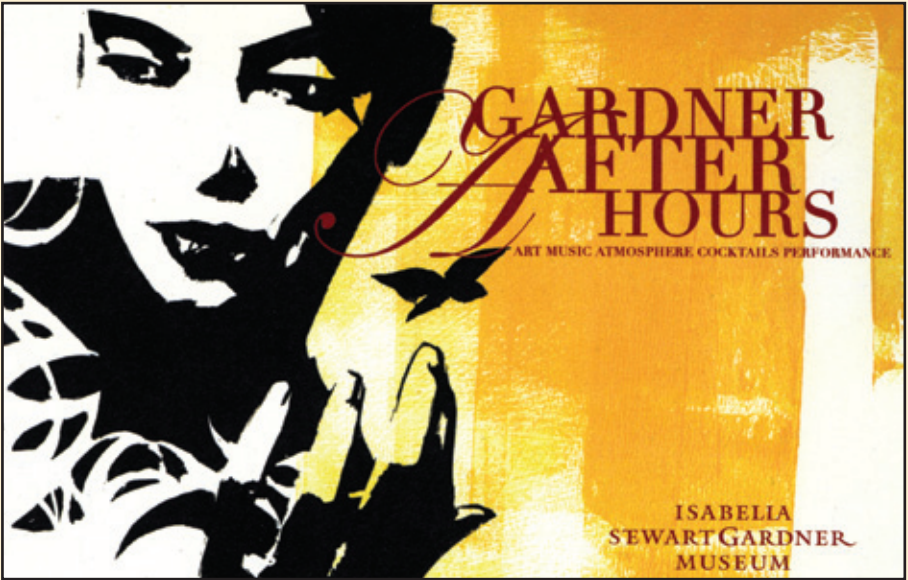
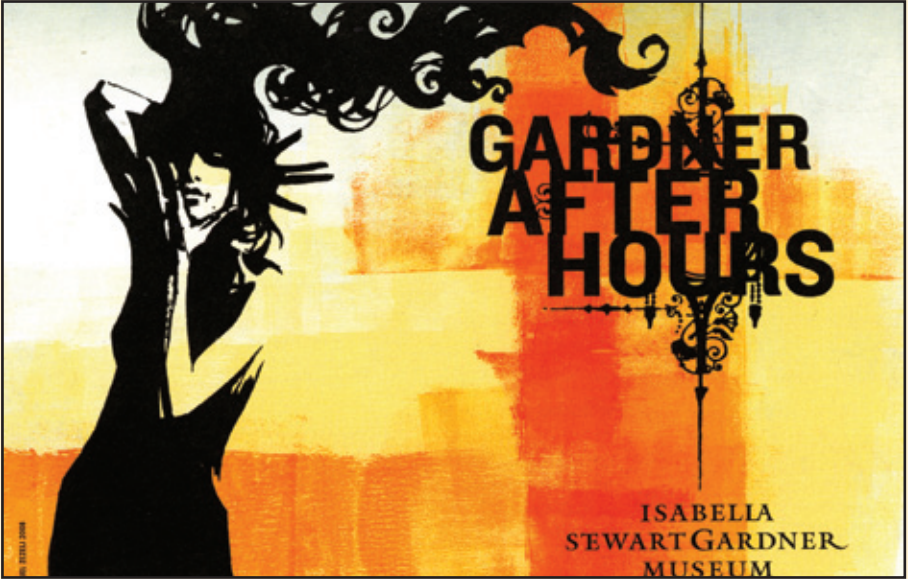


Upper left: Landscape Visions Lecture Postcard. Courtesy of the Gardner Museum, Boston.

Upper right: General Museum Postcard. Courtesy of the Gardner Museum, Boston.

Above: Illustration by Danijel Zezelj, 2007. Courtesy of the Gardner Museum, Boston.

Colorplate 4. Marketing Material for *After Hours* in Years 2 and 3



Illustrations by Danijel Zezelj, 2008 and 2009. Courtesy of the Gardner Museum, Boston.



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