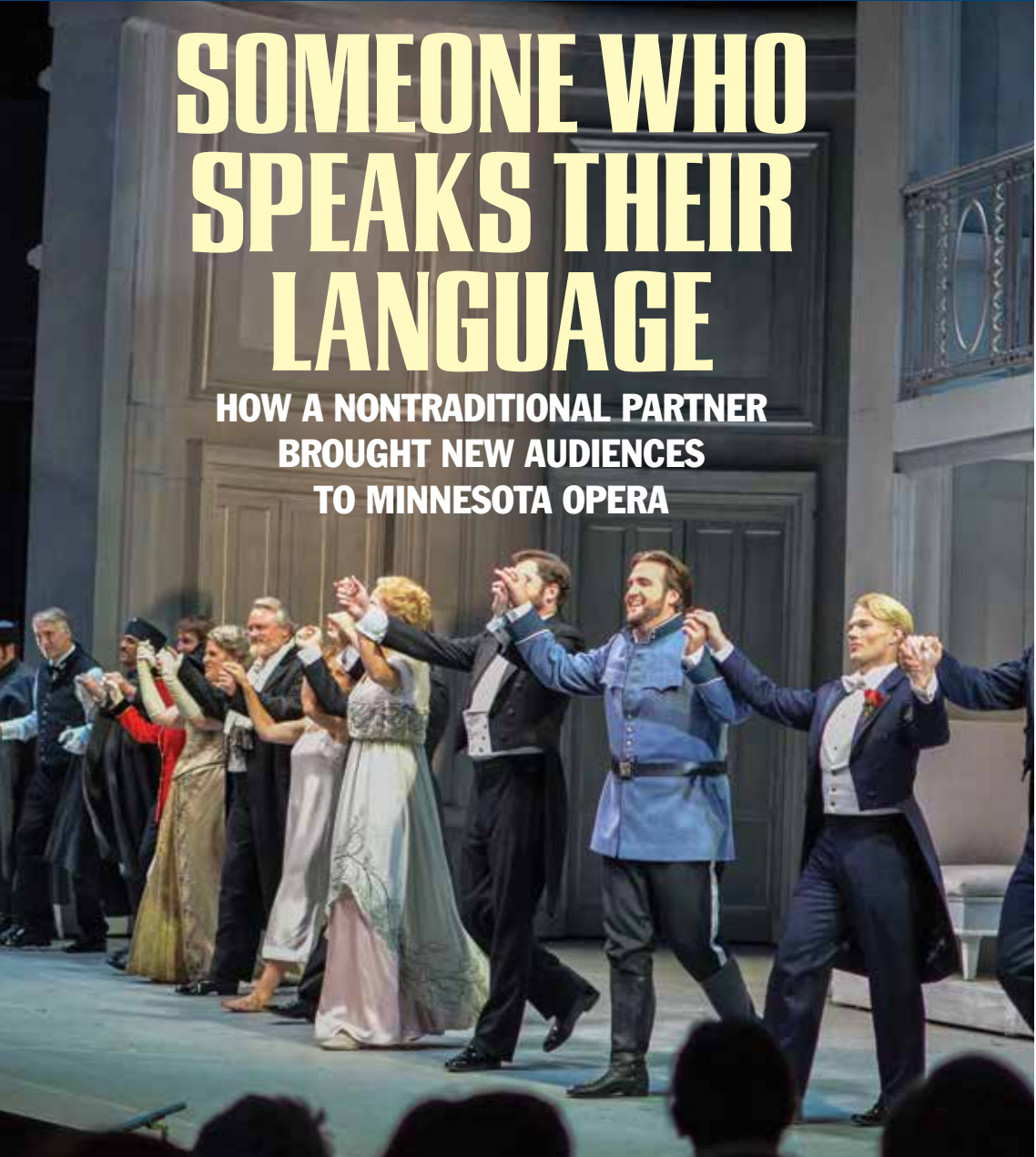




The Wallace Foundation

Wallace Studies in  
Building Arts Audiences



# SOMEONE WHO SPEAKS THEIR LANGUAGE

HOW A NONTRADITIONAL PARTNER  
BROUGHT NEW AUDIENCES  
TO MINNESOTA OPERA

**Bob Harlow and Cindy Cox Roman**

# *Wallace Studies in Building Arts Audiences*

## CULTIVATING THE NEXT GENERATION OF ART LOVERS

*How Boston Lyric Opera Sought to Create  
Greater Opportunities  
for Families to Attend Opera*

## MORE THAN JUST A PARTY

*How the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum Boosted  
Participation by Young Adults*

## ATTRACTING AN ELUSIVE AUDIENCE

*How the San Francisco Girls Chorus Is Breaking Down  
Stereotypes and Generating Interest Among  
Classical Music Patrons*

## BUILDING DEEPER RELATIONSHIPS

*How Steppenwolf Theatre Company Is Turning  
Single-Ticket Buyers into Repeat Visitors*

## SOMEONE WHO SPEAKS THEIR LANGUAGE

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

*Forthcoming titles in 2015  
will include case studies of  
audience-building programs by:*

THE CLAY STUDIO  
THE CONTEMPORARY JEWISH MUSEUM  
FLEISHER ART MEMORIAL  
PACIFIC NORTHWEST BALLET  
SEATTLE OPERA

# **SOMEONE WHO SPEAKS THEIR LANGUAGE**



**HOW A NONTRADITIONAL PARTNER  
BROUGHT NEW AUDIENCES  
TO MINNESOTA OPERA**

**Bob Harlow and Cindy Cox Roman**

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface	vii
Executive Summary	1
Finding New Audiences	5
A Crisis Leads to a Serendipitous Breakthrough	9
The Making of a Partnership	16
1. Live Endorsements	17
2. Prerecorded Commercials	20
3. Ticket Giveaways	23
4. Opera Insights	25
5. Artist Interviews	27
6. Partnership with KSTP-TV	28
7. Partnership Budget	30
Gradually Encouraging Purchase	31
Results	34
1. Punnett's Listeners Redeemed Their Tickets at a High Rate	34
2. Comp Recipients Return, but Converting Them to Paying Ticket Buyers Is Slow	35
3. More Middle-Aged Women Are Active at Minnesota Opera	37
4. Ian Punnett Is an Effective Spokesperson for Minnesota Opera	37
Analysis	42
1. The Value of a Trusted Endorser	43
2. Weaning New Audiences Off of Free Tickets Is a Long Road	45

*Copyright 2014 The Wallace Foundation*

*Cover photo Minnesota Opera's Arabella © 2013 Noorah Bawazir for Minnesota Opera*

*Editor: Jennifer Gill*

*Interior Design: Tom Starace*

*Published by Bob Harlow Research and Consulting, LLC, New York, NY*

*ISBN 978-0-9847287-5-6*

<https://doi.org/10.59656/A-AD8565.001>

3. New Audiences Don't Know What They Want	46
4. Psychological Barriers of "Free"	51
5. New Audiences Speak a Different Language	53
Moving Forward	57
Questions to Consider	59
About the Authors	61

## PREFACE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

approached as a separate initiative or program.

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

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

While the individual reports provide details of particular strategies, the collective experience across the organizations also suggests that there is no one winning tactic, no killer promotion, no social media strategy that alone will help organizations build audiences in a sustainable way. Instead, successful audience building is an integrated and coordinated effort with several parts of an organization working together over several years’ time, more often than not in the face of very slow progress or setbacks. The reason is simple: It takes time for an organization to learn how to connect with a new audience, and once that public begins to respond, it takes time to develop a steady following. But, while organizations may have to operate differently to connect with new audiences, that does not mean they need to change who they are or what they produce. In fact, such a strategy may backfire, because an audience engagement initiative that departs from an organization’s mission or core values likely will not receive the broad and ongoing support needed to maintain it.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

**A** great many individuals and organizations assisted us in our research, and we want to express our heartfelt appreciation. First, this work would not have been possible without the generous support of The Wallace Foundation. We would also like to express our appreciation for their guidance and support to The Wallace Foundation staff members Lucas Held, Ed Pauly, Jessica Schwartz, Daniel Windham, Will Miller, and Christine Yoon. Ann Stone of The Wallace Foundation was an important strategic advisor from the project's beginnings to its conclusions. As editor, Jennifer Gill provided an engaging draft that we are confident readers will appreciate. Pamela Mendels's and Daniel Browne's counsel helped us refine the draft to improve clarity of writing and completeness of thought.

We are also grateful to Lani Willis and the Minnesota Opera staff for their graciousness in providing time, insights, and candor. We were also fortunate to have received feedback on direction and an earlier draft of this work from Jim Hirsch of the Chicago Sinfonietta, Jo LaBrecque of Wolf Trap Foundation for the Performing Arts, Sandra Bernhard of Houston Grand Opera, and Julie Crites of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Of course, the final responsibility for the questions posed and conclusions drawn rests with us.

*Bob Harlow*

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**A**rts organizations of all kinds recognize that their futures depend on cultivating new audiences who will form long-lasting relationships with them. Perhaps no art form faces a bigger challenge in doing so than opera. Many people who've never been to the opera believe it's stuffy and elitist, and certainly not a place they'd like to spend a Saturday night. They think they'll feel like ignorant outsiders who can't possibly understand, let alone appreciate, what's happening on stage.

Minnesota Opera set out to dispel those preconceived notions among women ages 35 to 60 through an unlikely partnership with a local talk-radio host who had a knack for relating to this demographic. An opera buff himself, he made the art form relatable and exciting to women who had never been to a performance, so much so that they jammed the phone lines when he announced ticket giveaways to Minnesota Opera on his radio show. After four seasons of the partnership, 1,114 households new to Minnesota Opera had redeemed their free tickets to attend a performance, and 18 percent had paid to come back. The company found that perceptions of opera as elitist were not insurmountable, but also discovered that one or two positive experiences were not necessarily enough to turn most of these new audience members into frequent attendees. Follow-up research identified barriers to that elusive return purchase, and the company has used these insights to adjust its marketing strategy to bring a number of those new audience members back.

*It's a Tuesday evening in 2012 in downtown St. Paul as a standing-room-only crowd gathers in the spacious two-story lobby of the Ordway Center for the Performing Arts. The lobby's glass façade offers a sweeping panorama of the historic buildings surrounding Rice Park, but no one is there to admire the view. They've come to partake in Opera Insights, a 30-minute educational program offered before every performance by the Minnesota Opera. Tonight the company will perform Nabucco, and Minnesota Opera's artistic director and Opera Insights co-host Dale Johnson is discussing how the Italian opera, loosely based on the biblical story of King Nebuchadnezzar, was a surprise hit when first performed in 1842, establishing Verdi's reputation as a composer. "And yet, people didn't care that it had as much to do with Bible history as Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter has to do with the Civil War," quips Johnson's co-host, Ian Punnett. Laughter fills the lobby as the audience reacts to Punnett, a local talk-radio host who's better known for his humorous banter on pop culture and the latest celebrity antics.*

*But Punnett is also a serious opera lover, and Minnesota Opera has tapped him as an ambassador to reach a demographic critical to the organization's future: women ages 35 to 60. Since 2008, Punnett has given away hundreds of free tickets to Tuesday-night performances at the Minnesota Opera, most of them to women who've never stepped foot inside an opera house. And every Tuesday, he welcomes them by co-hosting Opera Insights with Artistic Director Johnson. Indeed, several of his fans clap enthusiastically tonight when he*



*asks how many in the audience got their tickets through his morning show on myTalk 107.1, the country's only talk-radio station geared toward women. While Opera Insights follows the same script as on other nights, highlighting the historical and aesthetic elements of the current production, Punnett infuses the conversation with his own anecdotes to make opera feel more accessible to newcomers who might think it requires an advanced degree to understand. He talks excitedly about how first-time watchers of Nabucco will be "humming the chorus all the way to your car" and notes that an upcoming production of Doubt will follow the same storyline as the Oscar-nominated film. Heads in the crowd nod in recognition.*

*A vintage Punnett moment comes at the end of Opera Insights, when he interviews conductor Michael Christie. Rather than pose a question about Verdi that might fly over the heads of newcomers, Punnett asks Christie why he doesn't take a lot of bows like other attention-seeking conductors. A few giggles emanate from the crowd. Christie takes the question in stride and talks about the team effort behind each production. The exchange could have easily happened on Punnett's radio show, and for his appreciative fans in the audience, it's just the right way to kick off their night at the opera.*

## FINDING NEW AUDIENCES

**M**innesota Opera's partnership with Ian Punnett and radio station myTalk 107.1 addressed a serious issue confronting arts organizations across the country: the need to attract new audiences to ensure the futures of their art forms. That challenge is even greater for traditional art forms such as opera, ballet, and classical music that have seen their "bread-and-butter" patrons get grayer with every passing season. Minnesota Opera has certainly noticed the aging of its most loyal patrons. Patrons over the age of 60 make up roughly half of its audience. And they are loyal: Subscribers over 60 renew their season subscriptions at a rate close to 90 percent.

Like many opera companies, Minnesota Opera tends to its older patrons, and also has programs designed to build lasting relationships with younger adults, including one called Tempo. By joining Tempo, patrons ages 21 to 39 get heavily discounted tickets, "nights out" at the opera during the run of each production, and invitations to exclusive, members-only post-opera parties with the cast. The results so far have been encouraging, with membership growing 48 percent since 2007, to 208 members. Minnesota Opera's Marketing and Communications Director Lani Willis hopes Tempo will groom the next generation of operagoers, but realizes there's a long road ahead. "Nobody just wakes up one day and decides they want to be an operagoer," she says.

With its core audience of patrons 60 and over and programs

in place to draw young adults, Minnesota Opera noticed both a gap, and an opportunity. What it lacked in 2007 was a marketing strategy for people between those two life stages. Willis was particularly interested in reaching more middle-aged women. Many were coming, but not enough to build a solid pipeline. In 2007, women bought 70 percent of all tickets, but only 16 percent of these purchasers were 35- to 60-years old. Willis saw an opportunity to engage more women in this age group who had never been to the opera, but knew she'd first have to change their perceptions about the experience.

---

---

**“NOBODY JUST  
WAKES UP ONE  
DAY AND DECIDES  
THEY WANT TO BE  
AN OPERAGOER.”**

---

---

Trying to break through to any new audience is a complex and expensive endeavor, with no guarantee that first-time visitors will return and eventually become part of an organization's core audience. Perhaps no other art form faces more risk in doing so than opera, given the deeply entrenched perceptions among many people who've never been exposed to it. For them, opera is personified as a fat lady with horns. It's arcane and can only be appreciated by knowledgeable aficionados, which they are not. They can't relate to it, or see what it would add to their lives.<sup>1</sup>

Minnesota Opera, the nation's 11th-largest opera company, has been working to debunk those ideas since its founding in 1963. Known as a progressive "alternative" opera company through the early 1970s, it merged with the St. Paul Opera in 1975. Although it has expanded its focus to include more traditional repertoire, the company remains dedicated to the principle that opera is a living and evolving art form. Popular operas

---

1. Louise K. Stevens, *Motivating Opera Attendance: Comparative Qualitative Research in 10 North American Cities*. (Washington, D.C.: Opera America, 2008).

---

---

### MINNESOTA OPERA AT A GLANCE

- Mission: Minnesota Opera combines a culture of creativity and fiscal responsibility to produce opera and opera education programs that expand the art form, nurture artists, enrich audiences, and contribute to the vitality of the community
- Founded: 1963, merged with St. Paul Opera in 1975
- Has a history of presenting contemporary and traditional opera as well as new works
- 11th-largest opera company in the United States
- Performs five to eight performances of five productions each season at the Ordway Center for the Performing Arts (capacity: 1,764)
- President: Kevin Ramach
- Artistic Director: Dale Johnson
- Director of Marketing: Lani Willis
- Operating budget: \$10.1 million

---

---

such as *The Barber of Seville* and *Turandot* share each season with works by contemporary American masters, all performed in St. Paul's 1,764-seat Ordway Center for the Performing Arts.

Its commitment to new work took a large step forward in 2007 with the production of *The Grapes of Wrath*, an original commission that won critical praise and garnered attention from top opera companies worldwide. That success led to the following year's launch of the company's New Works Initiative, a seven-year, \$7 million program to produce and disseminate new commissions and revivals of contemporary American works. The

initiative has already spawned the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Silent Night* in 2012, *Doubt* in 2013, and *The Manchurian Candidate*, premiering in 2015.

With an internal culture that values out-of-the-box thinking, the company decided to take a calculated risk in partnering with Punnett. He not only was a true opera lover, but also had an uncanny ability to connect with and relate to his female listeners, many of whom fall into Minnesota Opera's target market. They trusted him and valued his opinions. Minnesota Opera believed that Punnett's reach and relatable style could help women ages 35 to 60 overcome their hang-ups about opera and enjoy the grandeur of the art form. Along the way, the partnership taught Minnesota Opera staff many important lessons about forming and nurturing a relationship with first-time visitors, and these lessons will be useful to any arts organization looking to expand its fan base.

## A CRISIS LEADS TO A SERENDIPITOUS BREAKTHROUGH

**W**illis got the idea for a partnership with Punnett after averting one of the biggest disasters in her 10-year tenure at the company. It was late February 2008, and the company would soon raise the curtains on the 300-year-old German baroque opera *The Fortunes of King Croesus*. It marked the first time a U.S. opera company would stage the obscure work, but despite advance praise from national and local media, ticket sales were dismal. As the company's marketing and communications director, it was up to Willis to turn things around. Hoping to drum up interest, she asked Artistic Director Dale Johnson to explain the opera in a lively, short video for the organization's website. Unfortunately, it took him 35 minutes to unravel the complex story. "The opera had some of the most beautiful musical moments we've had since I've been here," says Willis, "but I couldn't sell it."

Pressure intensified when Willis learned that an important patron would attend the production's Tuesday-night performance. Minnesota Opera offers five to eight performances per production, with Tuesday night's typically drawing the smallest audience. But ticket sales for *Croesus* were bad even for a Tuesday. Days before the performance, the company had filled only 59 percent of the 1,764 available seats. Willis was panicking.

As she brainstormed ways to fill the house, Willis got a phone call from the producer of a local talk-radio show called *A Balanced Breakfast with Ian and Margery*. The drive-time (6

to 10 a.m.) morning show was hosted by Ian Punnett and his wife, Margery, on myTalk 107.1, a commercial radio station in Minneapolis–St. Paul. Willis knew Punnett and his show well. As part of her job, she routinely scouted new media outlets and personalities who might cover the opera company. When she discovered a few years earlier that Punnett was a longtime opera fan, she contacted his producer and arranged for Punnett to conduct several on-air interviews with Johnson about upcoming productions.

This time, it was the myTalk 107.1 producer who had an idea to pitch. Punnett’s wife wanted to do something really special for his approaching birthday. Could one of the company’s opera singers come to their studios and surprise Punnett by singing “Happy Birthday” on the air? Willis readily agreed—and then sensed an opportunity. Punnett’s birthday was Monday, March 3, the day before the Tuesday-night performance of *Croesus*. Desperate to fill seats, she asked if Minnesota Opera could give Punnett free tickets to the show as well as tickets to give away to his listeners. The promotion didn’t present any conflicts of interest, so the radio station agreed.

Willis figured the giveaway would move about 50 tickets when Punnett announced it to his listeners the next morning. Instead, callers jammed the phone lines of the opera company’s ticket office and scooped up 500 tickets in two hours. The following night, the Ordway felt full at 91 percent capacity. Even more startling than the full house was the behavior of the people in the seats. Tuesday performances tend to draw a staid crowd, in part because the company offers discount tickets to senior citizens for that night. This Tuesday was different. The audience was “electric,” says Willis. They were effusive, giving several vocal ovations and clapping loudly. The crowd’s enthusiasm even caught the attention of the performers and back-

stage crew. The next day, myTalk 107.1 received several calls and emails from listeners thanking them for the night out. “This was my first opera,” wrote one. “It was so exciting. Thank you for the free tickets.”

Willis was delighted by what had happened so serendipitously—and intent on figuring out how to do it again. A partnership with myTalk 107.1 had never crossed her mind before, for obvious reasons. MyTalk 107.1, the nation’s only talk-radio

station geared toward women, promotes the tagline “A Little Gossip. A Lot of Laughs.” Five pairs of hosts entertain listeners for two to three hours a day with banter on the latest celebrity breakups, and entertainment news. The tone is irreverent and cheeky, and hosts like to poke fun at themselves and guests. The station’s most popular daytime program is *The Lori and Julia Show*, whose stars are described as “bold, bodacious, occasionally bawdy.”

MyTalk 107.1 listeners are much more likely to know the Kardashians than *Croesus*, but their demographics intrigued Willis and her staff. Seventy percent are women between the ages of 35 and 64, and they’re highly educated. That was exactly the target audience Willis was hoping to cultivate and draw in bigger numbers to the opera company.

Minnesota Opera’s own research as well as external studies have identified several factors that deter participation, regardless of the demographic group. Cost is a big one. Minnesota Opera offers a limited number of \$20 seats at each performance, but full-price tickets can reach as high as \$200. Performing arts companies have found ways to overcome that barrier with discounted or free tickets, believing that first-timers will

---

---

**CALLERS JAMMED  
THE PHONE LINES OF  
THE TICKET OFFICE  
AND SCOOPED UP 500  
TICKETS IN TWO HOURS.**

---

---

return as paying customers once they see how much they enjoy the experience. A large study of people attending a major orchestra performance for the first time has tempered that thinking, however: Researchers found that only 10 percent of those newcomers returned for another performance.<sup>2</sup>

Perceptual barriers also are steep for opera. Many people who've never attended one believe doing so requires specialized knowledge that they themselves do not possess. They think they'd feel like outsiders—and ignorant ones at that—were they to enter an opera house. The fact that operas are often sung in a foreign language only exacerbates their fears. Even the titles of the operas confound many.

Through its research and that of other companies, Minnesota Opera knew that people are most often introduced to the opera through family and friends. That insight is in line with a large-scale study, *Motivating Opera Attendance: Comparative Qualitative Research in 10 North American Cities*, in which researcher Louise K. Stevens found that people become opera fans after a series of events, such as going as a child, being invited by family several times, or “working up” to opera through exposure to other art forms, like the theatre or orchestra. With that knowledge in mind, Willis and her staff launched a one-to-one marketing promotion in the 2008–2009 season that encouraged full-season subscribers to bring a friend to the opera for free. When subscribers received their season tickets in August, they also got a voucher good for one free ticket to a production of their choice. (Patrons who bought a three- or four-opera subscription received a slightly different offer.) The only rule for the “Bring-a-Friend” program was that the friend must be new

---

2. Oliver Wyman, “Turning First-Timers into Life-Timers: Addressing the True Drivers of Churn” (New York, Oliver Wyman: 2008).

to Minnesota Opera’s database. The company then added them to future solicitations. While only 15 to 20 percent of subscribers take advantage of the offer in any given season, nearly half of those who’ve been invited have gone on to buy tickets themselves.

Willis started to think about the one-to-one promotion in light of the success with the spontaneous ticket giveaway on Punnett’s show on myTalk 107.1. The giveaway had drawn a large number of women in the demographic that Minnesota Opera had been targeting through its Bring-a-Friend program. To his 50,000 listeners, Punnett was a friend whose opinion they valued. They loved hearing him dish with his wife Margery about the previous night’s episode of *Dancing With the Stars* while drinking their morning coffee or commuting to work. “We’re essentially a sports talk station,” Punnett explains. “It’s just that our sports is what happened the night before on TV.” While his morning show captured a small share of the market—3.4 percent of the 5 to 9 a.m. market among women ages 25 to 54—his listeners were highly engaged. As Willis puts it, “People who listen to it, *really* listen to it.”

Punnett’s listeners weren’t necessarily operagoers, as anecdotal feedback after the giveaway had confirmed, but he was. His love of the art form had developed at an early age, prompted by the stories and characters. While his talk show revolved around gossip, he sometimes interjected a review of an opera he had recently seen. For Punnett, there’s not much of a leap between the drama on reality TV shows like *Real Housewives* and the timeless, over-the-top stories of opera. The elaborate costumes, beautiful music, and gorgeous sets of an opera production add to its grandeur. Indeed, he knew how to make a 300-year-old baroque opera sound so fun and exciting

---

---

### **A BALANCED BREAKFAST WITH IAN AND MARGERY**

**A Balanced Breakfast with Ian and Margery** evolved from Punnett's prior midmorning show on myTalk 107.1. During the show, he would call his wife, Margery, and pick up a conversation—or friendly argument—that they had been having about something in the news, usually celebrity or pop-culture related. Eventually, Margery would hang up and Punnett would continue on with the topic. Listeners loved Punnett's banter with his wife, so the couple's calls became more frequent and their conversations longer. Sensing an opportunity, the duo suggested to station management that they co-host the morning drive-time show. With that, **A Balanced Breakfast with Ian and Margery** was born.

---

---

that his listeners jumped at the chance to get free tickets.

With his relatable style, Willis believed Punnett had the potential to become “opera’s Oprah” and ignite interest in the art form just as the TV talk-show host had done for books. Minnesota Opera’s Bring-a-Friend program had been a modest attempt at relationship marketing. Could the company partner with an ambassador like Punnett and successfully scale that 1-to-1 concept to 1-to-50,000?

**Figure 1. Publicity Photograph of Ian and Margery Punnett**



## THE MAKING OF A PARTNERSHIP

**M**innesota Opera had targeted women ages 35 to 60 through radio before, primarily by advertising on AM830 WCCO, the most popular commercial radio station in Minnesota for this demographic. It also ran paid sponsorships on Minnesota Public Radio (MPR), which has dedicated coverage of classical music and a listenership that, like Minnesota Opera's audience, skews older. In addition, MPR broadcasts operas performed by the company and provides publicity through artist interviews and news coverage.

A partnership with myTalk 107.1 was certainly an atypical media choice, but given Punnett's love of opera and his strong connection with listeners, Willis approached the radio station about a formal relationship built around advertising that featured Punnett. She believed that Punnett's endorsement could help address the perceptual barriers among women ages 35 to 60 that opera was stuffy and "not for me," while the ticket giveaways could address the cost barrier, eliminating the financial risk that might keep them from trying something new. Minnesota Opera's proposal easily fit into the station's business model, as it already had a practice of having hosts endorse certain paid advertisers for which they felt an affinity. The radio station also suggested expanding the partnership to include a smaller role for its "sister" TV station, local ABC affiliate KSTP-TV.

Such an endeavor would be both risky and costly for Minnesota Opera. To cover the expenses it would incur as it

developed and refined its approach, it applied for and received a four-year, \$750,000 Wallace Excellence Award from The Wallace Foundation. Key budget areas included:

- Advertising and endorsement fees on myTalk 107.1 and KSTP-TV over four years (\$315,000)
- Creating a new database administrator staff position to build and manage a system for engaging and tracking comp-ticket recipients (\$175,000)
- Survey and focus group research to evaluate the program (\$70,000)
- Defraying the potential (face value) cost of the tickets that were given away, although not all of them would have necessarily sold. Minnesota Opera mitigated that expense by offering tickets to Tuesday performances, traditionally a slow night, and varying giveaways as a function of a show's popularity (\$155,000).

Midway through its 2008–2009 season, Minnesota Opera set in motion the following components of its paid promotional partnership.

### 1. LIVE ENDORSEMENTS

**O**n average, Punnett did twenty 60-second live endorsements for each opera production every season. He did one endorsement every weekday morning, beginning two weeks before each production opened and continuing until the last performance. Productions typically opened on a Saturday night, followed by performances on Tuesday night, Thursday night, Saturday night, and Sunday afternoon. For example, Punnett did live endorsements for *Madame Butterfly*, which ran from April 14 until April 22, 2012, every weekday morning from

March 26 through April 20. Endorsements were scheduled at a different time each day during Punnett's four-hour show to catch listeners who tuned in earlier or later. As the performance date neared, Punnett tweaked his endorsements to create buzz and a sense of urgency to buy tickets. He might note, for example, that a particular performance was sold out, but seats were still available for another night. "It built a sense of excitement and kept the story live and changing," says Willis.

Punnett used talking points prepared by Willis and her team for his live endorsements, but he also improvised. In doing so, he tried to open what he calls the "fun door" to opera. He eschewed explanations of a work's history or discussions of aesthetic elements because unfamiliar audiences could easily get lost and feel that they did not know enough to be able to enjoy the opera. He wanted to find that hook that would, as he says, "create the shortest-distance line between me talking and somebody going." He demystified opera by emphasizing what newcomers would connect with instantly. He often used the plot itself as a starting point, focusing on the timeless qualities of the story or its dramatic elements, and also showcased both the spectacle and the beauty of the music (see sidebar, *Sample Live Endorsements from Ian Punnett on myTalk 107.1*).

Punnett sought to make attending opera sound like an exciting night out. Far from being staid and stuffy, he wanted to share the idea that opera is "really over-the-top entertainment," he says. "There's an orchestra and lights and a big stage with all these people and voices. I think that in itself has a very strong appeal."

While he loves the art form, Punnett wasn't afraid to poke fun at it. Sometimes he would joke about the crazy plots or how singers standing a few feet apart on stage pretend not to see each other. He also understood that opera isn't for everybody.

---

---

### **SAMPLE LIVE ENDORSEMENTS FROM IAN PUNNETT ON MYTALK 107.1**

In his live endorsements, Punnett showed several sides of opera that he believed would resonate with his listeners and help them find common ground with things they already knew and loved.

Punnett presented opera to his listeners as over-the-top entertainment.

- *The Minnesota Opera Company is back, with another amazing season at the Ordway Center in St. Paul [musical excerpt plays in the background]. This year's season kicks off with the love triangle that turns deadly, in Bizet's The Pearl Fishers. This rarely seen opera is an extravaganza of music, fashion, and dance, with colorful sets and costumes by British fashion icon Zandra Rhodes. Tony Award winner Jesus Garcia and the international sensation Isabel Bayrakdarian shine above the shimmering score by the composer of Carmen. Tickets are going fast for The Pearl Fishers. Get yours today at [mnopera.org](http://mnopera.org) or call 612-333-6669.*

He showed them that opera was already part of their lives.

- *Every year, millions of children learn to appreciate classical music through the story of Peter and the Wolf. Every year, millions of children enjoy the timeless story of the little wooden boy Pinocchio. Now, for a limited time the Minnesota Opera Company presents Pinocchio, the perfect introductory opera for children and adults—who aren't afraid of the dark. Like you've never seen the story before. The Adventures of Pinocchio at the Ordway Center in downtown St. Paul. The Times of London calls Pinocchio "funny, poignant, tuneful," and "spectacular" for the whole family. The amazing, magical, wild production of Pinocchio from the Minnesota Opera Company. Get tickets online at [mnopera.org](http://mnopera.org) or call 612-333-6669.*

(continued next page)

---

---



Above all, he made opera relatable. He wanted his listeners to see that opera stories are both contemporary and timeless.

- *Mary Stuart is back. This is an opera that is so contemporary and yet so ancient and beautiful and timeless at the same time. The story of two women, Queen Elizabeth and Queen Mary, who were both vying for the power of the throne, and the love of the same man. One gets a little control over the other and the next thing you know, you've got the opera Mary Stuart by Donizetti. For a queen to stand, a queen must fall. You can get your tickets now for terrific prices. You've got to go early, though—mnopera.org. The first ticket sales will be Saturday, January 29th, but that will sell out. We'll be there for the show on Tuesday, February 1st. Mary Stuart next for mnopera.org, Minnesota Opera. After that it's La Traviata on the way. You should get your tickets to La Traviata next for Minnesota Opera.*

He sometimes teased his wife and co-host, Margery, who isn't an opera fan, for falling asleep during the overture. And when a listener emailed her reaction to attending the opera *Nabucco* with her husband, Punnett read her note on the air: "Thank you for the tickets. This was a wonderful night, loved *Nabucco*, and my husband said it was the best sleep he'd had in weeks."

## 2. PRERECORDED COMMERCIALS

To expand his reach, Punnett recorded 30-second commercials to promote Minnesota Opera's productions on other myTalk 107.1 shows during the week and weekend. One ad was recorded for each production. The number of times a show's ad ran varied, although each usually ran 20 to 30 times per week for flights of between two and seven weeks leading up to opening night.

## SAMPLE PRERECORDED COMMERCIAL SCHEDULE AND SAMPLE COMMERCIAL

Prerecorded commercials on myTalk 107.1 promoted the launch of single-ticket sales at the start of each season, as well as all of the individual productions. The schedules varied from year to year, but Minnesota Opera typically ran more ads for its first two shows of the season than for the three productions in the winter and early spring. Below is an illustrative schedule for the 2012-2013 season.

	Performances	Advertising Schedule	Spots per Week	Total Spots
Single-Ticket Promotion	N/A	2 weeks, Jul. 23-Aug. 5	33	66
<i>Nabucco</i>	Sep. 22-Sep. 30	7 weeks, Aug. 13-Sep. 30	19	133
<i>Anna Bolena</i>	Nov. 10-Nov. 18	7 weeks, Oct. 1-Nov. 18	19	133
<i>Doubt</i>	Jan. 26-Feb. 3	2 weeks, Jan. 14-Jan. 27	26	52
<i>Hamlet</i>	Mar. 2-Mar. 10	2 weeks, Feb. 18-Mar. 3	26	52
<i>Turandot</i>	Apr. 13-Apr. 21	2 weeks, Apr. 1-Apr. 14	26	52

The ads ran throughout the day. Below is the schedule for the *Nabucco* prerecorded ads:

Time of Day	Spots
M-W 10 a.m.-3 p.m.	3
M-W 3 p.m.-7 p.m.	3
Sa-Su 8 a.m.-7 p.m.	4
M-Su 5 a.m.-10 p.m.	4
M-Su 12 a.m.-12 a.m.	5
One-Week Total	19

(Continued on next page)

---

---

Sample Prerecorded Commercial for *Nabucco*: [Verdi's *Va, Pensiero* plays in the background] *Minnesota Opera's 50th anniversary season opens September 22 with Verdi's Nabucco. Love, power, and politics collide in biblical Babylon in this monumental drama full of soaring choruses and triumphant arias. With English captions projected above the stage, you won't miss a thing. Tickets start at just \$35, and with just five performances, they're going fast. Visit mnopera.org or call 612-333-6669 today.*

---

---

Punnett also recorded ads that ran for the two-week period after single tickets went on sale each season to promote the season in general. The ads were spread out across myTalk 107.1 programs to reach listeners in the target demographic who tuned into the station at other times.

Punnett wrote the commercials in collaboration with Minnesota Opera's marketing team to meet the same two-fold goal as his live endorsements: build awareness of upcoming performances and show the fun and familiar aspects of the art form (see sidebar, *Sample Prerecorded Commercial Schedule and Sample Commercial*).

Occasionally, Punnett and the Minnesota Opera marketing team disagreed on key message points. Punnett thought he knew what would resonate with his listeners, while staff members believed they knew from experience what points to communicate. One difference in opinion emerged over translations. Minnesota Opera knew from its own research that potential audience members didn't realize English captions were projected above the stage, even though the fact was publicized repeatedly. Willis and her team felt it was an important point to convey, since many people wrongly assume they have to know a foreign

language to enjoy opera. Punnett, on the other hand, didn't think that was of concern to his listeners. He saw the 60-second airtime as precious real estate, and wanted to use it to showcase the opera's hooks or catchy moments, or point out that good-price tickets were going fast. If he felt time allowed, he mentioned the captions. Punnett went with his instincts in many cases, and often opera staff came to see things his way. They appreciated Punnett's insights into his audience, one that they were still learning about. "I wanted him to push us beyond our comfort zone," explains Willis, "and challenge our assumptions about what we put out there, because obviously, we were going to have a blind eye about certain things."

Still, there were times when Willis insisted that Punnett stick to certain points and not others. When the company presented *Nabucco*, for instance, Punnett wanted to revise the copy for the recorded commercials to connect it more closely to the biblical story of King Nebuchadnezzar, after whom the opera is named. He believed that this would be a familiar hook for his listeners, even though the focus of the opera isn't the events most associated with the biblical story. The marketing staff, however, was concerned that while Punnett's interpretation might resonate with his listeners, they'd leave the opera feeling they didn't get what they were sold. Willis explained to Punnett why it was important to stay on script, while at the same time making sure he knew that she valued his creativity and enthusiasm.

### 3. TICKET GIVEAWAYS

**T**he ticket giveaway was central to the partnership because it directly addressed one of the biggest practical barriers keeping people away: price. Comp tickets were offered for the Tuesday-night performance, as it was often the show with the most

available inventory. Punnett announced the giveaway after a live endorsement on either the Monday or Tuesday morning prior to the performance, and urged listeners to call the Minnesota Opera ticket office “right now” for a free pair of tickets. There were 20 myTalk 107.1 ticket giveaways in all, for the last three operas in the 2008–2009 season, for all five operas in the next three seasons, and for the first two in the 2012–2013 season. The number of tickets per giveaway varied; Minnesota Opera made fewer tickets available for the most popular productions. And sometimes listener interest did not match availability, so on a few occasions, not all available tickets were given away. On average, 75 callers received free tickets each time, mostly in pairs.

Willis believes Punnett’s live endorsements and taped commercials in the weeks leading up to each opera helped prime his listeners for the giveaway. By the time the ticket offer was extended, listeners had likely heard Punnett talk enthusiastically about the opera for weeks. He had made the opera sound fun and accessible, so much so that they figured they had nothing to lose by calling for tickets. In some cases, they waited 45 minutes on the phone to get them.

Punnett personally invested himself in the success of the partnership, going beyond the role of a typical pitchman and working with Minnesota Opera staff to develop promotions that he believed would resonate with his listeners. In fact, many staff members jokingly referred to him as “adjunct staff.” For the production of *La Traviata* in the 2010–2011 season, for instance, he suggested a “*Pretty Woman* Night” ticket giveaway. Many of his listeners had likely watched the movie *Pretty Woman* and remembered the scene in which the character played by Julia Roberts attends her first opera, *La Traviata*. Not only could listeners get free tickets, but Punnett promised that one lucky

attendee would be selected to watch the opera “*Pretty Woman* style,” in box seats with him and his wife, Margery. In terms of generating interest, the promotion was a hit. Out of 200 comp tickets given to myTalk 107.1 listeners, 159 were redeemed by 95 listeners. There was one snag: Punnett drew the lucky winner of the box seats from among the performance’s entire audience, not only the myTalk 107.1 comp-ticket holders. The winner was an older patron who didn’t know the radio host and wasn’t thrilled with his new seats. The slip-up was an important lesson for the staff about running such promotional contests.

#### 4. OPERA INSIGHTS

The partnership also called for Punnett to co-host Opera Insights, a free 30-minute educational talk held in the Ordway’s lobby before each performance. Opera Insights has been part of Minnesota Opera’s programming for many years. Its goal is to introduce audience members to the opera’s music and characters, as well as provide its historical and cultural contexts. Artistic Director Johnson and members of the artistic staff lead the program, with young opera singers typically joining in to answer questions from the audience and to perform a brief excerpt from the production.

Punnett co-hosted Opera Insights at each Tuesday-night performance, the same night that ticket-giveaway recipients attended. When announcing the giveaway on the radio, he would mention Opera Insights and invite listeners to join him at it. His involvement in Opera Insights accomplished two important things. First, it reassured first-time operagoers that they would feel welcome when they walked into the Ordway. Punnett likened himself to the leader of a field trip who would hold his listener’s hand as she ventured into something new. As he saw it,

listeners felt like, “If I am going to do something new and scary, give me somebody I can relate to. Have them there for me.”

With Punnett as co-host, Opera Insights also presented an opportunity to give new operagoers a deeper understanding of and appreciation for the art form. Before the partnership with Punnett began, the crowd for Opera Insights on Tuesday nights skewed toward older, diehard opera fans. “They want it straight and traditional,” notes Johnson.

That changed when Punnett joined as co-host in 2009 and comp-ticket holders started filling the seats. Punnett often opened the talk by welcoming the audience and asking how many people had received their tickets through myTalk 107.1. He and Johnson would then discuss the opera’s music and historical context in an unscripted, free-flowing conversation of the kind that listeners recognized from his radio show. He might, for example, ask Johnson if he had ever visited the places featured in the production or the opera singer about his worst experience on stage. His lighthearted approach made new operagoers in the audience feel comfortable raising their hands to ask their own basic questions, like when an opera artist first started singing.

Indeed, Willis noticed that even the energy in the lobby felt different when Punnett co-hosted Opera Insights. There

was laughter and enthusiastic applause—atypical behavior for an Opera Insights crowd. Seats for the talk filled up fast, and late arrivals would perch on the lobby stairs or stand in the back to listen. However, not everyone loved Punnett’s layman perspective. A few longtime patrons complained that the new format was superficial and changed their season subscriptions to another night. One member of Minnesota Opera’s board of directors who attended the Tuesday-night talk with Punnett was nonplussed. Her reaction: “Who is this guy?” The full lobbies on Tuesday nights were a testament to his appeal among many, however, and Minnesota Opera staff valued Punnett’s contribution to the program. “Ian is a cheerleader,” explains Johnson. “His function from the very beginning was to get the Tuesday-night audience primed for a fun occasion, and he very much succeeded.”

## 5. ARTIST INTERVIEWS

**W**hen the partnership began, Punnett conducted call-in interviews with opera singers on his radio show the day of the ticket giveaway. Punnett engaged his guests in typical myTalk 107.1 banter and celebrity gossip. If the Emmy Awards had been on TV the night before, for example, he might ask the singer if she had watched and to rate a particular actress’s dress. The goal was to make the artists relatable and demystify the world of opera for people who had never seen a performance. Punnett intentionally steered clear of inside topics like a particular opera’s composer or an artist’s past performances; he didn’t think his listeners cared, and at worst, it could alienate them. “If you’re namedropping, it just makes people who don’t know those names feel stupid,” says Willis.

The marketing staff asked only those artists they knew well

**Figure 2: Punnett and Johnson Hosting Opera Insights**



to participate in the interviews, and prepped them by explaining what the format was (a humorous exchange about celebrity and entertainment news) and what it wasn't (a serious talk about opera or their work). While some artists enjoyed it, others were irked that they had to get up early on a Monday morning, one of their few days off, to have such a fluffy conversation. Concerned by their feedback, Minnesota Opera gradually moved away from scheduling interviews on Punnett's show, tapering off in the second and third years of the partnership.

## 6. PARTNERSHIP WITH KSTP-TV

The centerpiece of the partnership with KSTP-TV was a ticket giveaway during *Twin Cities Live*, a local talk and variety show airing weekdays from 3 to 4 p.m. Five times a year—once for each production, usually on the Thursday before opening night—artists from Minnesota Opera appeared on the show and sang an excerpt from the opera with piano accompaniment. When they were finished, the *Twin Cities Live* hosts announced that each member of the 50-person studio audience would get a free ticket to the Tuesday-night performance of the production in the “goodie bag” they received for coming to the show. This automatic giveaway meant that, unlike Punnett's listeners, audience members didn't have to call Minnesota Opera for a ticket. Minnesota Opera gave out single tickets because it assumed that people attended *Twin Cities Live* with someone else, and those pairs (or groups) could go together to the opera.

Minnesota Opera quickly found shortcomings with the partnership. Unlike Punnett, the *Twin Cities Live* hosts didn't have a personal connection to opera. They interviewed the artists like journalists instead of enthusiastic fans, with maybe even too much reverence to make them relatable, according

to Willis, and approached the ticket giveaway as just another segment on the show. While Punnett created his own content and often ad-libbed on the air, TV personalities rely largely on producers to write their lines and have little input in the script rolling across the teleprompter. There was also the issue of frequency. Minnesota Opera was featured on *Twin Cities Live* only five times a year, compared to the continuous drumbeat on Punnett's show and during other myTalk 107.1 programs through his prerecorded commercials. In all, Minnesota Opera ran eight ticket giveaways on *Twin Cities Live* starting in the 2008–2009 season. Although it had originally planned to continue them alongside the giveaways on myTalk 107.1, a low redemption rate (detailed in the Results section) led the company to phase them out during the 2010–2011 season.

KSTP-TV also agreed to air commercials for Minnesota Opera throughout the year on days other than the ticket promotion. The opera company had done some television advertising in the past, but nothing on this level. Unlike Punnett's endorsements on myTalk 107.1, these were standard TV commercials and typically featured one or more artists from the production talking directly to the camera.

One bonus was that KSTP-TV produced the 30-second spots at no additional cost, making it possible for Minnesota Opera to execute the plan on a limited budget. Opera staff prepared the scripts, which included a brief description of the opera and a few key messages, such as that ticket prices started at \$20 and captions were projected above the stage. The Opera also produced season-specific ads that ran on KSTP-TV during the summer and at other times when there were no performances.

Minnesota Opera welcomed the chance to collaborate with KSTP-TV in such a cost-effective way, but the quality of the commercials varied. Some of the station's producers assigned to

the commercials came with ideas, while others were less engaged. Quality also depended heavily on the artists in a particular production: Some played better in front of the camera than others. As a result, Minnesota Opera opted to forgo producing a commercial when it didn't feel the available artist would work out. Instead, it would run a season-specific ad or a trailer-type spot containing only words and images about the opera.

The commercials followed a similar schedule as the radio advertising, but on a smaller scale. Advertisements ran during the week that tickets for the upcoming season went on sale in July, and during the week preceding and the week of each show's run. While the schedule varied, about 20 commercials typically aired in a given week, mostly from late morning through early evening.

## 7. PARTNERSHIP BUDGET

**M**innesota Opera allocated \$315,000 of the \$750,000 project grant to cover advertising and endorsement fees for the four-year partnership, including \$190,000 for the myTalk 107.1 component and approximately \$125,000 for the KSTP-TV component. For each of the five productions per season, Minnesota Opera spent roughly \$15,000, for an approximate annual total cost of \$75,000. The advertising spend was geared toward radio, with \$9,000 allocated for Punnett's live endorsements, prerecorded commercials, and appearances at Opera Insights. The remaining \$6,000 paid for the TV commercials on KSTP-TV.

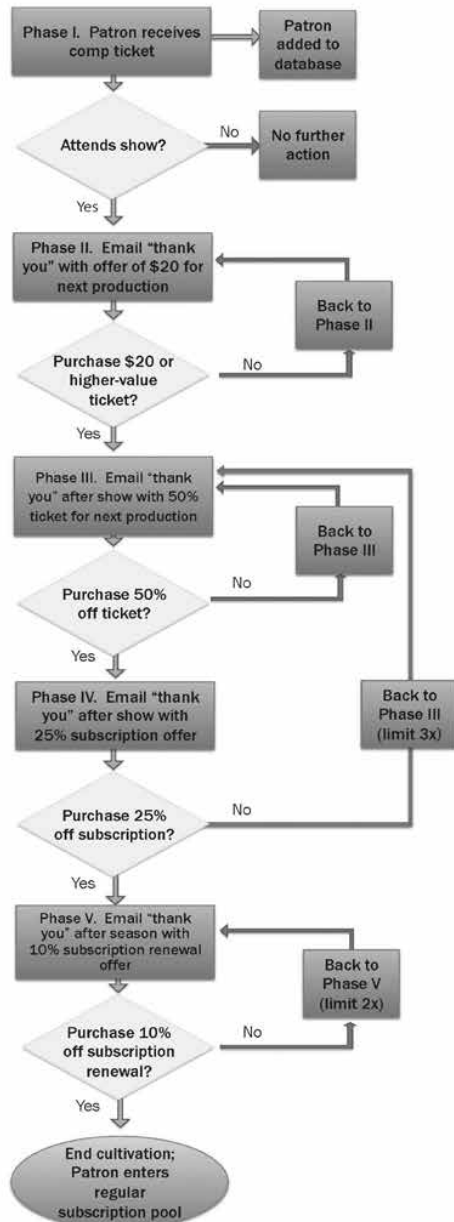
## GRADUALLY ENCOURAGING PURCHASE

**M**innesota Opera planned to encourage engagement among comp-ticket holders gradually, first by offering heavily discounted single tickets and then by inviting them to become season subscribers. The action track—illustrated in the diagram on the next page (Figure 3)—was developed largely by instinct and based on the widely held belief that moving from free to paid tickets takes time. Minnesota Opera hired a database administrator to manage the new database of comp-ticket recipients, segment it for email blasts to move them through the graduated sequence, and track movement through that sequence.

In general, the sequence began after comp recipients redeemed their free tickets. Minnesota Opera sent them an email thanking them for coming as a guest of myTalk 107.1 or *Twin Cities Live* and inviting them to attend the next opera that season for \$20. To give newcomers the best possible experience, the \$20 offer was usually good for any night and for any seat in the house, with occasional restrictions on top-tier seats in the orchestra and mezzanine. It was a significant discount, given that Minnesota Opera's very best seats command as much as \$200. If a purchase wasn't made, the offer was repeated for every opera for the next two seasons or until a ticket was purchased. Recipients who didn't buy a ticket over the course of two seasons were dropped from the sequence.

Once a comp recipient bought a \$20 ticket, she was offered a half-price ticket for the next opera. As with the \$20 ticket promotion, the offer was extended for every opera for the next

**Figure 3. Graduated Action Track**



two seasons or until a purchase was made. A person who bought a half-price ticket was then offered a 25 percent discount on a regular subscription for the upcoming season. Those who didn't buy a subscription dropped back to the half-price ticket offer, and the cycle repeated for the next three operas. Once a patron purchased a subscription, she received a 10 percent discount offer to renew it. If she followed through, she was entered into the database of regular patrons.

Minnesota Opera emailed an offer to comp recipients once per opera, typically two weeks before the production opened. Because it also included them in special offers and brochures sent to its broader patron database, a comp recipient could buy a ticket outside of the graduated sequence. Indeed, while the action track looked great on paper, it turned out to be an imprecise predictor of consumer behavior. Some comp recipients bought \$20 tickets, then paid full price for advance tickets to see a popular opera. A few even jumped straight to a subscription in response to discounts offered outside of the action track. Minnesota Opera kept an open mind, because it didn't want to close off any opportunity to engage these new operagoers. "You have to keep giving them opportunities to engage with you," Willis says, "and then figure out what their participation level is going to be."

## RESULTS

### 1. PUNNETT’S LISTENERS REDEEMED THEIR TICKETS AT A HIGH RATE

Minnesota Opera launched the partnership during the 2008–2009 season, and redemption rates clearly differed right away between the giveaways on myTalk 107.1 and those on KSTP-TV (see Table 1). In the first year, 81 percent of Punnett’s listeners who got a pair of free tickets used them, compared to 39 percent of the studio audience of *Twin Cities Live*, who received single tickets. Willis and her team attributed the low redemption rate among *Twin Cities Live* recipients to having given out single tickets (they had assumed that people went to the TV show with someone else, who would also receive a ticket and be able to go with them to the opera). They changed course and gave out pairs of tickets the following season, but saw redemption rates fall to 25 percent. Another factor that set the two giveaways apart was

**Table 1. Redemption Rates at myTalk 107.1 and KSTP-TV**

	2008– 2009	2009– 2010	2010– 2011	2011– 2012
myTalk 107.1 <i>A Balanced Breakfast with Ian and Margery</i>	81%	86%	79%	95%
KSTP-TV <i>Twin Cities Live</i>	39%	25%	N/A	N/A

the involvement of the recipient. *Twin Cities Live* audiences passively got tickets whether they wanted them or not. Punnett’s listeners, meanwhile, had to actively pursue the free tickets by calling the Minnesota Opera box office, sometimes waiting up to 45 minutes on the line. They also heard Punnett talk about an opera every morning leading up to a production, which fed their own interest and enthusiasm.

### 2. COMP RECIPIENTS RETURN, BUT CONVERTING THEM TO PAYING TICKET BUYERS IS SLOW

Table 2 shows the ticket-buying patterns of comp-ticket recipients, most of whom were women ages 35 to 60. Over four seasons, Minnesota Opera gave away 3,560 tickets, mostly in pairs. They were redeemed by 1,485 households. Of those households, 1,114 (or 75 percent) were new to Minnesota Opera’s database, as shown in the second line of the table. Data are shown separately for single-ticket and subscription purchasers. Because some of these new households bought tickets or subscriptions over multiple seasons, the table shows how many were making their first purchases and how many were returning purchasers. Return purchasers are comp recipients who bought either a single ticket or subscription for one season, then returned to buy either a single ticket or a subscription for a subsequent season.

Of the 1,114 households, 48 percent returned to the opera in some capacity. Nearly one-third came back on another free ticket, typically by participating again in a call-in on Punnett’s show. A total of 198 households, or 18 percent of the total, came back as paying customers, spending \$201 on average over the first four seasons of the initiative. Of those 198 households:

163 households (15 percent of total) bought \$20 tickets



**Table 2. Single-Ticket or Subscription Purchase by Comp Recipients**

	2008–2009	2009–2010	2010–2011	2011–2012 <sup>a</sup>
<b>Comp tickets issued/ Redeemed</b>	<b>939 issued, 753 redeemed</b>	<b>1,362 issued, 833 redeemed</b>	<b>678 issued, 535 redeemed</b>	<b>581 issued, 551 redeemed</b>
<b>Households new to Minnesota Opera</b>	<b>359</b>	<b>405</b>	<b>160</b>	<b>190</b>
<b>Single-ticket buyer households from comp recipients<sup>b</sup></b>	<b>29, all first-time</b>	<b>Total: 61 54 first-time 7 returning</b>	<b>Total: 64 40 first-time 24 returning</b>	<b>Total: 99 61 first-time 38 returning</b>
<b>Subscriber households from comp recipients<sup>b</sup></b>	<b>N/A<sup>c</sup></b>	<b>Total: 10 3 first-time 7 returning</b>	<b>Total: 11 5 first-time 6 returning</b>	<b>Total: 16 6 first-time 10 returning</b>

**a** Through end of calendar year 2012.

**b** Minnesota Opera uses households, not tickets sold, as the unit of analysis. Each household represents, on average, 1.9 tickets or subscriptions.

**c** Promotion began midway through subscription season.

---

38 households (3 percent) bought half-price tickets  
 152 households (13 percent) bought other discounted tickets  
 129 households (11 percent) bought full-price tickets or subscriptions

Most returned initially on a \$20 ticket, which was the first graduated offer, and most did so within one year of receiving their free tickets. In any given season, 8 to 10 percent of all comp recipients to date were active as either new or returning ticket buyers.

Through the end of the 2012–2013 season, these ticket purchases accounted for \$39,734 in revenue.

### **3. MORE MIDDLE-AGED WOMEN ARE ACTIVE AT MINNESOTA OPERA**

**W**omen ages 35 to 60 now account for 22 percent of Minnesota Opera’s patron database, up from 16 percent when the initiative started. Active patrons include single-ticket buyers as well as new, renewing, and lapsed subscribers going back to 2006 (roughly 76 percent of lapsed subscribers periodically buy single tickets, but not every season). It does not include comp-ticket recipients unless they have bought a ticket or subscription. Single-ticket sales to women ages 35 to 60 have also increased, more than doubling since the initiative began.

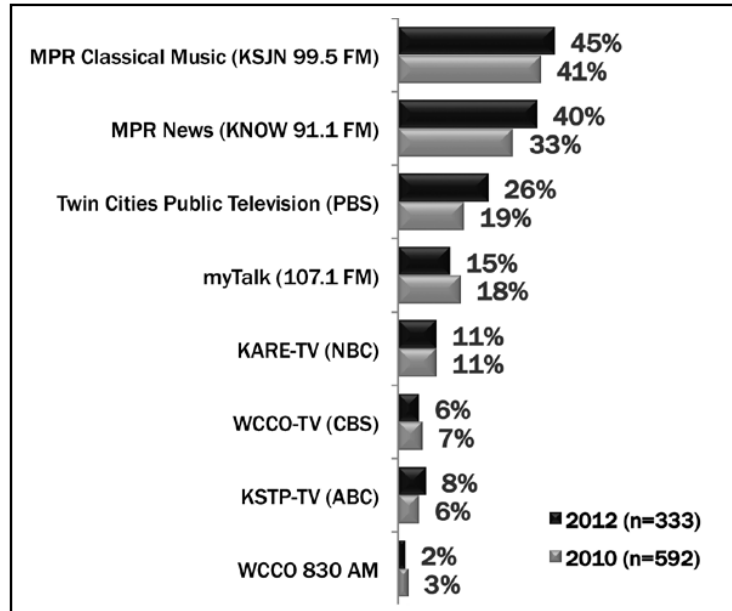
### **4. IAN PUNNETT IS AN EFFECTIVE SPOKESPERSON FOR MINNESOTA OPERA**

**I**n 2010 and 2012, Minnesota Opera conducted two waves of attitudinal and opinion research among patrons 18 years old and over. It recruited participants from its patron database

**Table 3. Minnesota Opera Ticket Purchases by Women Ages 35 to 60**

	Baseline 2007–2008	2008– 2009	2009– 2010	2010– 2011	2011– 2012
Active women ages 35–60 (% patron database)	1,109 (16% of patron database)	1,539 (17% of patron database)	2,179 (22% of patron database)	2,623 (21% of patron database)	2,711 (22% of patron database)
Single-ticket sales to women ages 35–60 (+ increase over baseline)	1,693	2,428 (+735)	3,951 (+2,258)	3,429 (+1,736)	3,783 (+2,090)

**Figure 4. Radio and Television Sources of Information about Minnesota Opera among Female Patrons Ages 35 to 60**

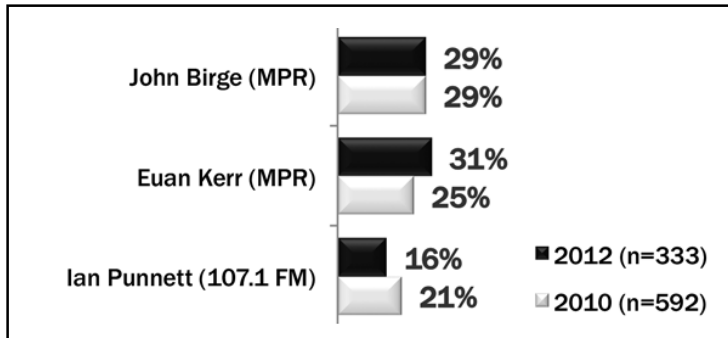


% = Percent who had heard about or heard promotions for Minnesota Opera in past 12 months

(including some comp-ticket recipients) through an email invitation to take an online survey. Respondents had to live in either Minnesota or neighboring Wisconsin and had to be involved in making their household's decisions to attend arts-related activities. The 2010 survey drew 1,635 respondents, including 592 women ages 35 to 60. The 2012 survey had 1,046 respondents, with 333 women ages 35 to 60. Participants answered a variety of questions about Minnesota Opera, such as what radio and TV sources of information informed them about the opera and their opinions about several media personalities, including Punnett.

Results from both surveys among women ages 35 to 60 are shown in Figure 4 and Figure 5. For the most part, their answers mirror those of the overall sample. Because participants were drawn from Minnesota Opera's general database, it's understandable that myTalk 107.1 and KSTP-TV are not the media outlets most often named as sources of information about the opera. Most female patrons ages 35 to 60 are typical operagoers who stay informed by listening to Minnesota Public Radio (MPR) or tuning in to the local PBS affiliate, Twin Cities Public

**Figure 5. Awareness of Radio Personalities among Female Patrons Ages 35 to 60**



% = Percent saying they were “aware of” each radio personality

Television. (That station has no connection to KSTP-TV’s *Twin Cities Live*.) Only 16 percent knew Punnett in the 2012 survey, about half the level who recognized the names of MPR classical music host John Birge and MPR arts correspondent Euan Kerr (see Figure 5).

Punnett may not garner wide name recognition, but among middle-aged women who know him, he emerged as a strong advocate of Minnesota Opera and the art form itself—more so than his counterparts in public radio. Table 4 shows the 2012 survey results, which are largely stable from 2010 (in the interest of presentation clarity, only 2012 results are shown). Of respondents who knew Punnett, 81 percent said they had heard him talk about Minnesota Opera in the past year, compared to 28 percent among those familiar with Kerr. Three out of four considered him an advocate for Minnesota Opera, much higher than the public radio hosts. Moreover, female patrons ages 35 to 60 who were familiar with Punnett were more likely to find him relatable.

**Table 4. Characterizations of Radio Personalities by Female Minnesota Opera Patrons Ages 35 to 60 (among those aware of each personality)**

	Ian Punnett (MyTalk 107.1)	John Birge (MPR)	Euan Kerr (MPR)
<b>Base: Total Aware of Personality</b>	<b>n=53</b>	<b>n=98</b>	<b>n=102</b>
Have heard information about Minnesota Opera from personality in past year	<b>81%</b>	61% <sup>a</sup>	28%
Is an advocate for Minnesota Opera	<b>74%</b>	51% <sup>a</sup>	22%
Is passionate about opera	<b>64%</b>	31% <sup>a</sup>	12%
Is someone I can identify with	<b>55%</b>	36%	30%
Really knows opera	45% <sup>a</sup>	36% <sup>a</sup>	13%
Is a good source of information on the local arts scene	45%	44%	56%
Is knowledgeable about the arts in general	42%	65% <sup>b</sup>	55%

% = Percent saying attribute describes radio personality

Statistics in bold are higher than both others at 95% confidence

**a** Significantly higher than Euan Kerr at 95% confidence

**b** Significantly higher than Ian Punnett at 95% confidence

## ANALYSIS

**M**innesota Opera had great success in attracting first-timers—no small feat for a company presenting opera, an art form that research has shown people often avoid out of intimidation or because they think they need specialized knowledge to enjoy it. Over four years of the ticket giveaway, the organization welcomed new audience members from 1,114 households, and 18 percent of them enjoyed the experience so much they paid to come back. That’s notable, considering that a large study of first-time attendees of another traditional art form—orchestral music—found that only 10 percent paid to see another performance.<sup>3</sup> Minnesota Opera’s approach to getting new people in the door was highly experimental. It took risks, probably more than most opera companies would attempt—and according to Willis, more than it likely would have taken without the outside financial support from The Wallace Foundation.

The number of women ages 35 to 60 buying tickets and subscriptions grew, but it’s difficult to know just how much of that increase was due to the initiative. The research conducted over the four years was broad and didn’t track how first-timers got to Minnesota Opera. As can be expected with such an experimental approach, not everything worked. The television partnership did not have the same traction as the radio partnership. Moreover, ticket-sales revenue from the new audience during the four years of the initiative did not come close to

3. Oliver Wyman, 12–13.

recouping the cost of the radio partnership. Even so, the opera company gained important insights into the mindset of first-time operagoers, including how to neutralize the seemingly formidable barrier of opera being seen as elitist and inaccessible. Its research also revealed some unexpected barriers to purchase that can keep first-timers from returning, and the company has used these insights to nimbly adjust its marketing strategy to bring a number of them back.

### 1. THE VALUE OF A TRUSTED ENDORSER

**T**he high redemption rates for Punnett’s audience suggest he was effective in attracting newcomers to Minnesota Opera, and the research illuminates why. His listeners not only identified with him, but also believed he was a credible source regarding the art form. That potent combination allowed him to dispel their preconceived notions about opera and persuade them to try it. Punnett’s relationship with his listeners made the partnership much more valuable than typical advertising, notes Minnesota Opera President Kevin Ramach. “Listeners have a certain buy-in with him that we can’t get through a straight ad,” he says. “It’s hard to come into an opera the first time and not really know what to expect. Ian helped break down the barriers to get people in the door, and with a better understanding of what they were going to see.”

Indeed, Punnett sought ways to make opera approachable to people with no prior experience with the art form. Instead of dwelling on an opera’s history or composer—topics that would more likely appeal to seasoned fans—he focused on its story and spectacle, setting it up as the kind of big entertainment that it is. He pitched a side of opera that isn’t often sold, with little risk of alienating first-timers or making them feel they weren’t smart

enough to appreciate what happens on stage. “My number-one goal is to give listeners permission,” he says. “Permission to think, ‘I’m so relieved that I’m not the only one watching *Real Housewives*.’ The same goes with opera. I wanted to give them permission to like opera, so that they wouldn’t feel weird or as if they were standing out if they went.” At the same time, he encouraged listeners to explore and learn about an opera’s aesthetic elements by joining him and Artistic Director Johnson at Opera Insights before the performance.

Qualitative research underscored the link between Punnett’s advocacy and the high redemption rates of his listeners. At the end of the 2008–2009 season, Minnesota Opera engaged a facilitator to conduct focus groups with people who had attended an opera after receiving a free ticket through a giveaway on myTalk 107.1 or KSTP-TV. Most participants were women ages 35 to 60, the desired target market. There were four focus groups in all, including two groups of people who had never attended live opera before the ticket giveaway and two groups who had. Minnesota Opera had several objectives for the focus groups. In addition to understanding ticket-buying behavior, it wanted to hear about the experiences of comp-ticket recipients at the opera and the role of the promotions in prompting them to return.

While the promise of free tickets was enough of an incentive for some, Punnett’s listeners also said that the talk-show host’s enthusiasm and knowledge of opera motivated them to go. They felt they were led to the opera, and noted that Punnett said they would be able to understand it, even if it wasn’t sung in English. He told them why they would enjoy a particular opera and that he would welcome them at Opera Insights, where they could learn more about the performance. To them, Punnett was

a “regular guy.” If he liked opera, they figured they might, too. Punnett believes his relationship with listeners allows him to be seen as a trusted source: “It’s one voice that says, ‘You’re going to like this. If you like everything else I’ve told you about or you trust me enough to give it a try, that’s all you need.’ That’s the difference of an endorsement.”

Focus group participants who got their comp tickets through *Twin Cities Live* appreciated it and thought the giveaway was a “nice surprise.” But they only had a hazy recollection of “something being talked or shown about the opera” on the show. They didn’t get the day-in, day-out encouragement that Punnett’s listeners did, something that may have contributed to their low rate of ticket redemption. (The disparity in redemption rates between KSTP-TV and myTalk 107.1 recipients may also be due in part to the fact that Punnett’s listeners had to opt in to the promotion by calling the box office to get their tickets. *Twin Cities Live* attendees got them whether they wanted them or not.)

## **2. WEANING NEW AUDIENCES OFF OF FREE TICKETS IS A LONG ROAD**

In the focus groups, first-time operagoers were overwhelmingly positive about the experience. Some seemed surprised they didn’t get bored, while others credited Punnett for prepping them well for the event. “Ian had said we would enjoy it, and we did,” said one participant. Those who attended Opera Insights liked it and said the experience made them feel more comfortable about watching the performance. They were pleased to find other attendees weren’t snobby or overdressed. Their feedback suggested that the perceptual barrier of the art form

as stuffy and elitist wasn't insurmountable. In fact, it started to erode after just one trip to the opera. Nearly half of comp recipients—48 percent—enjoyed themselves so much they came back

for another performance, further evidence that the perceptual barriers were softening.

Getting them to pay for that experience, however, was an entirely different matter. Nearly one-third (31 percent) of comp recipients returned to the opera

on another free ticket. Relatively fewer (18 percent) bought a ticket or subscription, even when offered at a hefty discount. Converting single-ticket buyers into subscribers was also a tough sell: Minnesota Opera sold only 37 subscriptions among the 1,114 new households over the course of the four years. That's not surprising, as even many regular patrons don't subscribe, and those who do, do not do so immediately. It's important to have realistic expectations.

### 3. NEW AUDIENCES DON'T KNOW WHAT THEY WANT

The focus groups also identified a significant barrier to ticket purchases that discounts alone would have limited power in overcoming: Newcomers don't know how to pick an opera and aren't familiar enough with the art form to know which ones they might like. That insight came when the focus groups were asked to review a post card announcing Minnesota Opera's upcoming productions and ticket prices. The marketing piece puzzled them. They didn't recognize any of the opera titles, and there were no cues to help them figure out which ones they might

like. Nothing captured their interest enough to even make them want to find out more, let alone buy a ticket. Unlike with the ticket giveaway, Punnett wasn't there to tell them which ones they would like and why.

A glossy, four-color brochure of Minnesota Opera's season elicited similar feedback. While the photographs and detailed plot descriptions provided some guidance, the focus group participants still didn't feel confident enough to make a decision and risk a lot of money on something they might not like. Their comments were along the lines of "it all sounds so good, but I don't know how to pick," says Willis. "We thought we were doing such a good job putting together these beautiful new brochures with emotional photographs and engaging copy. That was all true, but people couldn't make a decision."

The inertia that Minnesota Opera saw in its focus groups isn't unusual. Economists and psychologists who study decision making have long recognized that when consumers don't believe they know enough to make a choice or are overwhelmed by the options, they put off making a decision and often end up not making one at all.<sup>4</sup> Simply stated, people won't choose something they don't know anything about, particularly when money is involved. They'd rather do nothing than risk buying something they might later regret.

---

---

**“WE THOUGHT WE WERE DOING  
A GOOD JOB PUTTING TOGETHER  
BEAUTIFUL NEW BROCHURES.  
THAT WAS TRUE,  
BUT PEOPLE COULDN'T MAKE A  
DECISION.”**

---

---

4. E.g., Amos Tversky and Eldar Shafir, "Choice Under Conflict: The Dynamics of Deferred Decision," *Psychological Science* 3 (No. 6; 1992), 358–361. See also Benjamin Scheibehenne, Rainer Greifeneder, and Peter M. Todd, "Can There Ever Be Too Many Options? A Meta-Analytic Review of Choice Overload," *Journal of Consumer Research* 37 (2010), 409–425.

The ticket giveaways eliminated that inertia in several important ways. First, the tickets were free, removing the financial risk of making the wrong decision. They were also for a specific performance. Comp recipients didn't have to choose which opera to see, the performance date, or the seats—all aspects of operagoing that are second nature to a seasoned patron, but can confuse and intimidate people new to the art form, leading them to postpone the decision and just let it pass. Punnett, whom his listeners considered a trustworthy source, told them the story of the opera and why they'd like it.<sup>5</sup> Their only decision was whether to call for free tickets or not—an easy choice with very little risk.

Audiences do find it easier to buy once they become more familiar with opera. Research suggests that familiarity with specific operas is one of the largest motivators of repeat attendance—people go to operas they know.<sup>6</sup> But the road to becoming an opera fan is a long one. Successful cultivation of new patrons won't likely happen through a few return visits. It also takes additional engagement efforts that help build familiarity with the art form over time. Willis sees its Tempo program for young adults as a way to create a pipeline of the next generation of operagoers. "We're trying to make opera a part of their social and cultural lives, to build an appreciation for it so that they'll just want it in their life," she explains. That said, she recognizes that it could take years, even decades, to reap the long-term benefits. Orchestras are also experimenting with more elaborate engagement efforts with new audiences, but are still finding

---

5. Patrick Spenner and Karen Freeman have found this effect on a large scale, demonstrating that people are more likely to purchase when decisions are made simple via easily accessible information from trusted advocates. See Patrick Spenner and Karen Freeman, "To Keep Your Customers, Keep It Simple," *Harvard Business Review* 90 (2012), 108–114.

6. Stevens, 61.

that discounts are a necessary part of the equation.<sup>7</sup>

Minnesota Opera tried several tactics to guide new operagoers who were clearly stumped by all of the choices. In the 2009–2010 season, the marketing team tested a subscription postcard that prompted patrons to take an online quiz to identify operas that matched their personalities. Usage, however, was low. In the next season's brochure, the staff used a visual device to label operas as "Perfect for an Opera Newbie" or "Perfect for an Opera Buff." Willis's group had a gut feeling after the brochure mailed that the strategy was off. "We felt like we were saying 'opera smart' or 'opera stupid,'" she recalls. Seasoned operagoers knew how to pick; it was the newbies who needed extra help. Subsequent brochures have only featured the "opera newbie" label, and Minnesota Opera has found those operas typically sell better than others. That may be a sign of success, but those operas likely would have been big sellers anyway, because they tend to be among the more traditional, better-known productions in the repertoire.

The critical objective may be less about categorizing operas based on a person's experience with the art form, and more about demystifying the works and explaining what it would be like to attend a performance. Willis points out that newbies don't necessarily need "safe" repertory—after all, hundreds of first-timers responded enthusiastically to Punnett's initial invitation to attend the unknown *Fortunes of King Croesus*. But, she points out, newcomers must clearly see that a particular opera has something to offer that they will enjoy. "You've got to help somebody overcome the inertia, because the inertia is going to be there," she states.

The staff has also made a concerted effort to be more direct and conversational with people who contact the box office and

7. Rebecca Winzenried, "The Price Is Right," *Symphony* 61 (2010), 52–56.

need help choosing. If callers seem unsure about which opera to pick, for instance, the box-office team has a prepared list of talking points about each show in the season, and might start off by asking them about the types of music they enjoy. If patrons need help with seat selection, the staff has detailed information on seating sections at the Ordway and might ask about the kind of experience the caller likes to have at other types of live events. Advertisements also clearly state that people can call the box office for guidance.

Approaching the inertia from a different angle, they have experimented with simplifying offers too, or in the words of Marketing Manager Katherine Castille, “telling people what to do.” Take the new approach to subscription sales. With seven seating levels and two different pricing structures depending on performance day, as well as the option to subscribe to three, four, or five operas, the possible combinations can quickly get unwieldy for someone who’s not familiar with opera or the opera house. For a recent promotion, the marketing team limited the number of possibilities and ran a “3 for \$75” offer in the fall arts preview guide distributed by local weekly newspaper *Minneapolis City Pages*. The promotion drew 94 new subscriptions. Similar offers in other ads have yielded high response rates.

One of the company’s most successful strategies has been in prompting impulse buys of first-time subscriptions immediately following a performance, removing the possibility for postponing the decision. Before the final act, a staff member welcomes the audience from the stage and announces a half-price discount on first-time subscriptions. The only catch is that audience members must buy the subscription before they leave—there are no rain checks. It’s run the deep-discount deal for the past four seasons and targeted the three extra performances of the season’s biggest production, usually a well-known

opera such as *La Bohème* that has eight performances instead of the usual five. Because the three extra performances aren’t included in subscription series, they have a higher percentage of first-time visitors in the audience compared to the other nights.

Results from the impulse-buy promotion have been very encouraging. Minnesota Opera typically sells 300 new subscriptions each season through the offer (or 100 per night), with some operagoers waiting an hour in line to buy one. A recent production of *Turandot* brought in 519 subscriptions. Willis believes the offer captures people while they’re still on an “experiential high” from watching a performance, and it’s a decision that can’t be postponed. The half-price deal is too good to pass up, and it’s been much more effective than the 25 percent discount offered to comp-ticket recipients in the graduated sequence.

#### 4. PSYCHOLOGICAL BARRIERS OF “FREE”

**R**esearch on consumer decision making suggests another reason so many declined to open their wallets: People have a hard time paying for something that they previously got for free, no matter what the price is. Even though the absolute difference between a free ticket and a \$20 one may not seem significant, it presented a psychological hurdle<sup>8</sup> many new operagoers couldn’t jump. Indeed, research in the performing arts has found that first-time visitors are highly price sensitive to return ticket offers.<sup>9</sup> Only about 10 percent come back, even with discounts of as much as half off. Comparatively speaking,

---

8. See, for example, Kristina Shampanier, Nina Mazar, and Dan Ariely, “Zero as a Special Price: The True Value of Free Products,” *Marketing Science* 26 (2007), 742–757. The authors present research demonstrating that there is a vast difference in consumers’ minds (and hearts) between the value of something that’s free and something that’s not, which is greater than the simple difference between zero and the absolute price. Moving from free to paid is a psychological and, the authors suggest, emotional hurdle.

9. Oliver Wyman, 19–20.



### INSTITUTING A THREE-TICKET RULE

In the third year of the ticket-giveaway program, the box office at the Minnesota Opera started fielding calls from people who had no intention of buying a ticket. Instead, these callers wanted to know when Punnett would announce the next giveaway on his radio show. During that 2010-2011 season, Minnesota Opera distributed more free tickets to repeat recipients than to new audience members. For that season's performance of *Wuthering Heights*, for instance, 61 percent of comp recipients had previously received one. Other productions had similar levels of repeat visitors.

On the one hand, the repeat turnout was a positive sign. It suggested new operagoers enjoyed their first experience so much they wanted to go back a second (and even a third) time. However, Minnesota Opera worried that the preponderance of repeat visitors could preclude potential newcomers from getting tickets. Plus, if previous comp recipients knew they could obtain another freebie, they'd have no reason to pay for one.

To deal with the issue, Minnesota Opera instituted a policy that let comp recipients receive up to a maximum of three pairs of tickets. Those who had reached the limit were told by box-office staff that they no longer qualified for free tickets, but they could purchase a \$20 ticket for the performance. If they did so, and called again at a later date for another ticket giveaway, they were offered a half-price ticket. The box office didn't track how many callers took advantage of the discounts, but staff estimates and analysis of comp-recipient data suggest it was less than 25 percent.

Minnesota Opera did well by getting 18 percent of comp-ticket recipients to return as paying attendees.

Offering discounts or free tickets is somewhat controversial in the performing arts. Some practitioners believe there's no place for them at all because giveaways send a message that

their work is worth less than the cost of a full-price ticket. Others worry that would-be audience members will come to expect freebies or heavy discounts and won't pay full price as a result (see sidebar, *Instituting a Three-Ticket Rule*). Minnesota Opera itself hesitated to give away tickets before the initiative, but staff members now believe that comps and discounts have a place in an engagement strategy for new audiences, as long as those newcomers are tracked and cultivated as possible patrons. While mindful of these risks, Willis believes the giveaways were justified because getting people in the door is a powerful way to address the strong perceptual barriers that plague opera. Feedback from first-timers, both anecdotally and in the focus groups, support the strategy, she says:

*They all said the same things: "I didn't think I would like it as much as I did," "I didn't know I would be as comfortable as I was," "I didn't know it would be as easy to go as it was," "I did understand every word," "I felt at home," "I didn't feel dumb." All of the perceptual barriers go away if you can get someone through that door. At the end of the day, they may like or not like the art form, but those perceptual barriers are gone.*

### 5. NEW AUDIENCES SPEAK A DIFFERENT LANGUAGE

**M**innesota Opera was often reminded that most comp recipients had limited or no knowledge of opera, and therefore they approached the art form, as well as the organization, differently than traditional patrons did. They cared much more about the storyline than the composer or historical context. They didn't want to be talked down to, but they were interested in learning about opera in a way that felt approachable.

Punnett tuned in to this feeling and used his endorsements to sell aspects of opera he believed would appeal to newcomers. Anecdotal reports from the box office suggested that many first-time buyers were looking for a similar entry point when calling for tickets. “What’s that one about?” was a much more common question than who was singing or directing.

Conducting the focus groups also proved instructional. The marketing staff not only was able to hear women in the target demographic share their reactions and experiences in their own words, but also benefited from having an independent

---

**“IF YOU’RE TRYING TO  
DRAW IN NEW PEOPLE,  
IT DOESN’T HELP  
TO MAKE FUN OF  
SOMEONE WHO ASKS,  
‘WHAT’S A VERDI?’”**

---

moderator who “noticed through-points and made conclusions that I probably wouldn’t have drawn even sitting in the same room,” says Willis. “She didn’t come with our biases or baggage.” One important insight was how Punnett

broke through his listeners’ hesitation about going to the opera. The marketing staff wanted to pinpoint the specific promotion or announcement that made his listeners call for a free ticket. The moderator, by weaving together comments made in the focus groups, helped them see that calling wasn’t a spontaneous decision. Punnett’s listeners gradually warmed up to the idea of attending the opera by hearing him talk about it over time. Little by little, opera became accessible to them.

To draw in new audiences, Willis and her team found they had to keep an open mind and not get “sucked into this very niche world we live in.” One eye-opening moment came when Willis set up an interview on *Twin Cities Live* with an Italian conductor who was preparing to perform Verdi’s *Il Trovatore*.

The conductor was the son of a Verdi baritone, so Willis saw an opportunity for him to discuss why the opera is still performed and what makes it interesting. She emailed talking points to the TV show’s producer, who promptly wrote back and asked, “What’s a Verdi?” Willis says it was a wake-up call. “This is the level of cultural literacy, and you can’t really judge it,” Willis says. “As an opera marketer, it’s good to be reminded of that because if you’re trying to draw in new people, it doesn’t help to make fun of someone who asks, ‘What’s a Verdi?’”

How to make use of that insight was sometimes a source of tension inside the company. The marketing team wanted to make it as easy as possible for new operagoers to form connections between opera and the stories they already knew. When the company produced Donizetti’s *Maria Stuarda*, for example, all of the advertising referred to it as *Mary Stuart*. This approach wasn’t always fully supported, as illustrated when the company presented *Anna Bolena*, another opera from Donizetti’s Tudor trilogy, the following season. The marketing staff wanted to advertise it as *Anne Boleyn*, believing that would be more recognizable. The president disagreed, contending that *Anna Bolena* was widely enough known and wouldn’t confuse people. His decision won out.

Willis’s concern about such titles is that they bolster the perception of opera as an insidery, elitist world that requires a secret body of knowledge to enjoy. “It’s our job in marketing to remind the artistic team and others on staff who are very much in the world of opera to remember that,” she says. She had heard highly educated women in the focus groups trip over titles like *Roberto Devereux*. It was off-putting and embarrassing for them, as would be not knowing *Anna Bolena* was the same story as *Anne Boleyn*. “Why make somebody who’s not dumb *feel* dumb?” asks Willis.

Organizations that successfully bring in newcomers often face these challenges, and the solutions are far from clear-cut. An additional challenge arises when there are limited marketing dollars, and advertising has to appeal to as wide an audience as possible—it forces making choices. “You need to understand your audiences and speak to them in a lot of different ways, but you can’t always do it,” says Communications Manager Daniel Zillman. A print ad has limited space, he explains, and you can’t communicate everything that’s important to both traditional operagoers and people who’ve never been. And he is quick to point out that although newcomers appreciate some guidance, many of those who have been coming to the opera for years do *not* want to be told what they should see. The different audiences require different strategies, which in turn require dedicated resources so they can be carried out effectively over a long time span.

## MOVING FORWARD

**W**hile support from the Wallace Foundation Excellence Award has ended, Minnesota Opera continues to target women ages 35 to 60 who are new to opera. It has discontinued television advertising and Punnett’s live endorsements, both major expenses of the four-year initiative, but continued the ticket giveaways and recorded commercials on myTalk 107.1 through the 2012–2013 season. While research during the initiative didn’t track awareness of advertising or its impact on potential audiences, the staff believes the high redemption rate of the free tickets, as well as feedback from the focus groups, demonstrates that the radio partnership is effective in bringing new people through its doors.

The giveaways will be an ongoing expense, as Minnesota Opera will lose any revenue it may have earned from selling those tickets. The company minimizes the potential for decreased sales by projecting which performances will likely draw smaller audiences and therefore have more available inventory that would go unused anyway. It will also retain a database administrator, a position added during the initiative, who will continue to manage and track email promotions, along with other responsibilities.

Although the myTalk 107.1 partnership continued through the 2013 season, it did so without Punnett. The radio host resigned his position at the station in early 2013 due to an ongoing battle with tinnitus. Punnett’s departure was both sudden and unexpected, and brings to the fore a potential pitfall of this

approach: Investing in a spokesperson can help an arts organization break through to a new audience, but it carries risks. Any number of factors can suddenly make your endorser unavailable, throwing your marketing strategy into jeopardy.

Punnett possessed a rare mix of attributes that will make replacing him nearly impossible. He not only was a true opera buff, but also knew how to bridge the divide and make the art form accessible to people who thought they would never step foot in an opera house. Minnesota Opera staff are now looking for other influencers in both traditional and nontraditional media, even hosting social-media nights at the opera to encourage bloggers to write about their experiences. They'll continue to develop relationships to see where they might lead, always remembering that their willingness to experiment and take risks led to their serendipitous discovery of Punnett—and deepened their understanding of what it takes to welcome newcomers to the opera.

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

**M**any arts organizations believe that cultivating new audiences is critical for their long-term viability. If your organization wants to pursue new audiences, regardless of the approach you might take, here are some questions to guide your thought process and stimulate discussion.

- Building a core audience of repeat visitors is a slow process. New audiences likely will have to be courted several times with different incentives, such as discounts or other promotions. Is your organization committed to the long haul and prepared to handle it financially?
- Is your organization ready to serve an audience with different information needs and to develop innovative communications that talk to them in an accessible, intelligent way? Are there ways to relate your work to things that they are already familiar and comfortable with? Will everyone in the organization—from the executive director to marketing and artistic staff—be comfortable with that approach so it can be applied over time and build momentum?
- How will you get new audiences over initial inertia? In what ways can you simplify the purchasing decision, either by limiting the number of choices first-time buyers have to make or by helping them become more famil-

iar with your art form and organization, much as your current patrons are?

- Are there local personalities with broad reach and an interest in your art form whom you can leverage as ambassadors in a cost-effective way?
- Consumers often turn to online reviews for guidance when making other kinds of purchase decisions (e.g., TripAdvisor.com for hotel reviews), and companies like Disney and Intuit (TurboTax) leverage online communities of customers to help others select the right products and services.<sup>10</sup> Can you create online communities among audience members who exchange advice in online reviews or other forums that will help newcomers make decisions?

---

10. For examples, see Spenner and Freeman, 113–114.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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

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

**Cindy Cox Roman** is the CEO of WIT Consulting LLC, a strategic research and consulting company. She specializes in helping businesses and nonprofit organizations understand their target audiences, develop effective communications, and spot

new areas for growth and innovation. Her clients include Fortune 100 and smaller companies, nonprofits, universities, and marketing agencies.

Cindy is a veteran of some of the country's top communications and strategic research firms. Before founding WIT Consulting in 2001, she was a partner at Yankelovich Partners, where she headed the New York Custom Research practice. Cindy also held research and account management positions at Young & Rubicam, working with global teams to develop communications strategies for multinational clients. From 2007–2012, she served as a Technical Advisor to arts organizations that received Excellence Awards from The Wallace Foundation. She is a graduate of the Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University.



# The Wallace Foundation

Supporting ideas.  
Sharing solutions.  
Expanding opportunities.

**T**his look at the Minnesota Opera's effort to expand its audience is the fifth case study in a series of 10 offering insights into how arts organizations can attract new audiences to the arts and deepen the involvement of current audiences. Written for arts organization leaders, arts funders, policymakers, and arts management students, each study is the product of independent research exploring the success and challenges faced by different arts organizations as they undertook multi-year efforts to build their audiences. Strategic and tactical elements of each program are described in depth, along with factors that helped and hindered progress. Putting together findings from the 10 case studies, a separate report, *The Road to Results*, describes nine practices that arts organizations can use to make their audience-building programs more effective.

Current titles in the series include:

**Cultivating the Next Generation of Art Lovers:**  
*How Boston Lyric Opera Sought to Create Greater Opportunities for Families to Attend Opera*

**More Than Just a Party:**  
*How the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum Boosted Participation by Young Adults*

**Attracting an Elusive Audience:**  
*How the San Francisco Girls Chorus Is Breaking Down Stereotypes and Generating Interest Among Classical Music Patrons*

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

**Forthcoming titles in 2015 will include case studies of audience-building programs by:**

The Clay Studio  
The Contemporary Jewish Museum  
Fleisher Art Memorial  
Pacific Northwest Ballet  
Seattle Opera

A companion guide, *Taking Out the Guesswork*, will also be published in 2015, with detailed examples of how the 10 organizations used research to more effectively attract and retain audiences.

The Wallace Foundation  
5 Penn Plaza, 7th Floor  
New York, NY 10001  
212.251.9700 Telephone  
info@wallacefoundation.org  
[www.wallacefoundation.org](http://www.wallacefoundation.org)

ISBN 978-0-9847287-5-6

