

THE Tech Effect

SEATTLE FORGES A CULTURE OF LEARNING

With support from The Wallace Foundation, Seattle Opera developed technological resources to help build and retain audiences. Valuable lessons were learned from failure as well as success, and a healthy process of innovation and evaluation evolved. An abridged version of the case study by **BOB HARLOW** appears below. The full case study, *Extending Reach with Technology*, can be found at thrivingarts.org.

In 2008, **SEATTLE OPERA** felt a sense of urgency and uncertainty about how best to make use of digital technologies to both deepen relationships with existing patrons and attract newcomers. While nothing suggested they were losing touch with audiences, staff members suspected that being absent from online spaces could erode the company's visibility. Moreover, digital technologies could provide ways to enhance and extend the experience of attending a live performance. But, while senior staff saw multiple opportunities, they resisted the pressure to try everything at once. Instead, they tested out technologies systematically in a series of four yearlong experiments. They began by tapping audience research and local expertise to identify the greatest opportunities, and then deployed audience surveys and analyzed web-based metrics to evaluate their individual efforts, regarding each one as an educational experiment with useful lessons.

These were more than just a series of

experiments; Seattle Opera transformed how it related to audience members, letting them in on the creative process and inviting their comments. Over the course of the four years, the company also found ways to satisfy internal concerns about exposing too much to the public and built broad support for the initiative inside the organization, as well as strong cross-departmental collaboration.

Seattle Opera began in 2008 by tapping into the most savvy expertise available, assembling a task force that included company staff and board members, as well as professionals from local technology companies recruited specifically for this purpose — and motivated by their love of opera. The objective: to learn as much as possible before deciding which technologies to adopt. Over the course of nearly a year, the task force examined topics ranging from social media — at that point in its infancy — and various forms of e-mail distribution, photography and digitized formatting, to the intricacies of capturing and disseminating intellectual

property and using technology to create a commercial revenue stream.

In mid-2008, the task force delivered recommendations for the use of digital technologies to engage audiences: Create virtual communities where audience members could interact with the company and each other; provide opportunities for people to learn more about opera and Seattle Opera productions; and make opera more accessible outside the opera hall. Staff believed these initiatives could enhance the performance experience while boosting retention efforts and the potential to attract newcomers.

Seattle Opera's marketing staff applied for and received a four-year, \$750,000 Wallace Excellence Award from The Wallace Foundation. Each year, they produced technology-based engagement tools, complemented in some instances by in-person activities designed to give audience members new ways to experience the art form both inside and outside the opera house. They also conducted regular evaluations to identify



Behind-the-scenes footage of Rhinemaidens rehearsing their flying routines was featured in Seattle Opera's online series of *Ring* cycle videos.

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the impact each tool had on particular audiences. Deployment was spread across three sub-initiatives during the four years:

- **Storytelling Through Technology:** A *Ring*-specific interactive website shared the broader story of how the opera cycle was produced and included forums for patrons and bloggers who wished to share commentary with the company and each other.
- **Community Connections Through Technology:** In year two, the company used a mix of podcasts, in-person symposia and online experiences to introduce audiences to the story behind *Amelia*, a commissioned work by composer Daron Aric Hagen and librettist Gardner McFall.
- **Experiencing Place Through Technology:** In years three and four, the company used technology to bring opera to new places and spaces, including producing a free simulcast to introduce opera to novices and to reconnect with audiences that had drifted away.

Each year, Seattle Opera used the lessons learned to develop the next year's activities, refining successful programs and retooling or jettisoning those that were less effective, as measured by survey research and online metrics. Seattle Opera saw the four years as an opportunity to create a "Petri dish" in which some experiments would flourish and others would not, with each providing lessons that would inform the company's technology strategy moving forward. "We were all open to trying some things that wouldn't work," says Executive Director Kelly Tweeddale.

STORYTELLING THROUGH TECHNOLOGY

For year one of the initiative, Seattle Opera saw its 2008–2009 *Ring* cycle as an ideal opportunity to go behind the scenes and into the lives of operagoers by creating forums where *Ring* devotees and new attendees could interact with each other in virtual communities. The choice struck some as odd: *Ring* patrons are generally an older audience, leading skeptics to wonder whether this was

the right target for technology-based engagement. Audience research indicated it was worth doing.

By mid-2008, the technology task force had provided a long list of ideas for using technology. To identify those with the greatest chance of success, marketing staff conducted an informal survey in mid-2009, sending e-mail invitations to 2,300 households of patrons whose e-mail addresses had been captured when purchasing *Ring* tickets. Thirty-five percent responded. The survey did detect an older audience — a third were at least age 66 — but 70 percent watched YouTube occasionally, more than 50 percent used an iPod, iTouch or iPhone, and many were engaged in podcasts, blogs and Facebook. Asked to indicate what content they preferred to see, respondents most often mentioned behind-the-scenes information from the artists and from the technical and production staff.

But there was a hitch: The company wasn't accustomed to showing work in progress to the public. As a result, artists and creative staff were reluctant to reveal

a less-than-perfect product that might remove the opera's mystique. Working through those fears, the company developed *Road to Valhalla*, an online series showing the making of the *Ring* cycle in five separate 5- to 10-minute videos.

In addition to the videos, Seattle Opera developed other technology-driven engagement tools, including preview podcasts, a video series following an opera novice as she learns about producing the *Ring* cycle, a video feed of between-act backstage activity, a Caption of the Day Contest, and a Share and Review Program that allowed patrons to share clips online. The Seattle Opera blog was turned over almost entirely to covering the *Ring*. Media and blog entries were also published on Seattle Opera's Facebook page and via Twitter. The content was sent via e-mail to *Ring* ticketholders and to other patrons in Seattle Opera's database. The intention was not only to engage *Ring* attendees, but also to build interest and a following among non-*Ring* audiences.

To further refine technology engagement tools, Seattle Opera tested ideas in four focus groups of patrons. Participants echoed what the company had heard in its earlier patron surveys: a strong interest in tactics that reveal what goes into making an opera. Accordingly, the staff shifted its focus to those tools.

Seattle Opera presented three full cycles of the *Ring* between August 9, 2009, and August 30, 2009. In addition, it hosted symposia with Wagner scholars and pre- and post-performance lectures and conversations, among other ancillary programs. And, of course, during that time, the opera deployed the technology-based engagement applications connected to the *Ring*, as described above. To gauge their effectiveness, Seattle Opera surveyed three discrete patron groups in September 2009 and a fourth group of prospective patrons. The surveys asked about awareness, use and experience of the different technology-based tools. Results were consistent with what Seattle Opera had heard in the focus groups and earlier research, suggesting audience members want both to see and to understand what goes on behind the scenes. In fact, the two most popular and impactful tools by far were those that did just that: the backstage video feed and *Road to Valhalla* videos.

As for the other tools, relatively few people used the pre-performance podcasts, and as a result, they were phased out and replaced with previews that were lighter on discourse and heavier on musical excerpts. The Caption of the Day Contest and the Share and Review Program were used by few. The blog was

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The success of the behind-the-scenes and "making of" videos sharpened the company's focus on engagement initiatives involving self-directed learning. In particular, the staff set out to make behind-the-scenes videos a central component of their strategy. Facebook, Twitter and other interactive media were still under consideration because they were growing platforms, but planning focused less on social media and more on determining the audiovisual content that would work best with particular operas.

COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS THROUGH TECHNOLOGY

Year two of the technology initiative coincided with the premiere of Seattle Opera's first commissioned work in 25 years, *Amelia*. The opera tells the story of a woman haunted by the disappearance of her father, a Navy pilot shot down in the Vietnam War when she was a child. Alvin Alexander Henry, Seattle's director of marketing and communications, believed it would be essential to create interest in the production with both Seattle Opera's core audience and potential new viewers. He and his team proposed two strategies to accomplish this: Forge relationships with community groups having potential connections to *Amelia* or its production, and, building upon lessons learned from the *Ring*, use technology to create interest and provide context.

In the two months prior to the *Amelia* premiere, several events were created in partnership with organizations whose missions dovetailed with Seattle Opera's strategy. Two panel discussions of approximately 90 minutes each with three Vietnam veteran pilots were hosted in conjunction with Seattle's Museum of Flight. Seattle Opera board member and Vietnam War veteran Karl Ege moderated the first, and the executive director of a local arts and sciences foundation facilitated the second. A discussion series called *Creating Amelia* took place at a local

bookstore on three Mondays in April. The 60- to 90-minute discussions featured the *Amelia* creative team and were moderated by General Director Speight Jenkins. And there was a lecture titled "Autobiographical Writing: From Life to Text" given by librettist McFall at the Richard Hugo House, a center for local writers, in late April.

For the run of *Amelia* itself, Seattle Opera again partnered with The Museum of Flight to produce a full-scale exhibit

exploring the theme of "flight in one's life" through historical photographs, Vietnam War memorabilia and *Amelia* set sketches. The exhibit was displayed on all four lobby levels throughout the opera hall. Audience members could browse through the exhibit pre-curtain, during the intermission or post-show, and also could take a guided, prerecorded audio tour (designed by The Museum of Flight) by calling a provided number on their mobile phones.

In reaching out to different organizations, Henry found two common misconceptions about *Amelia*. First, many people assumed the production was about the aviator Amelia Earhart, and second, that it focused on the Vietnam War itself. This discovery increased the urgency of providing vivid context. Inspired by the popularity of the *Road to Valhalla* videos, the staff created a similar seven-part series about the creation of *Amelia*. Each video would focus on one aspect of the production and be hosted by a department or production head. Marketing staff created twice the amount of audio and visual material they had for the *Ring*. In addition to showing how the work onstage was produced (completely from scratch), they also had another behind-the-scenes avenue to explore — the commission itself — and turned to the development of the book, libretto and music.

Amelia was linked to the Seattle Opera blog with content that differed in both frequency and tone from material created for the *Ring*. Entries were updated more often, and content included introductions to the cast members, information about how the opera was commissioned and developed, and a FAQ explaining the opera's plot.

To measure the use and impact of tools created for *Amelia*, Seattle Opera conducted an online survey just after its final performance. Invitations were sent to e-mail addresses in the company's database. The survey yielded responses from 1,238 patrons who had seen a performance (86 percent of whom had

attended it as part of a subscription) and an additional 717 who had attended Seattle Opera in the 2009–2010 season but had not seen *Amelia*. Not surprisingly given the ease of access, more *Amelia* patrons participated in online than in-person activities. Moreover, the online pursuits — particularly those providing a context for the new opera — had the greatest impact. However, usage rates were generally lower than for the *Ring*. The *Ring* “making of” series was seen by 34 percent of audience members, and the *Amelia* series by just 19 percent. The survey results did suggest the activities helped audiences become familiar with *Amelia*, with nearly half of single-ticket buyers saying a driving reason they went to see the opera was their interest in the story line or themes, and 16 percent attending because they had participated in an *Amelia*-related event or activity.

EXPERIENCING PLACE THROUGH TECHNOLOGY

During the 2010–2011 season, the third year of the initiative, Seattle Opera experimented with additional in-person and technology-driven engagement tactics. Unlike the first two years, when suites of activities were built around particular productions, in years three and four, the company developed technology-based tools across multiple productions. Considerably fewer tools were produced so that staff could devote time and resources to their first-ever public simulcast, to be presented in year four.

Working with Microsoft, the opera company built touch-screen tabletop kiosks that included over 1,000 archival images from Seattle Opera productions performed during its nearly 50-year history, organized by season and by show. The kiosks were designed on wheels, allowing for mobility, and the large surfaces allowed simultaneous viewing by multiple patrons. Seattle Opera also experimented with Amazon’s Kindle to develop a tablet version of the *Spotlight Guide*, the educational booklet that accompanies every performance, but audience interest was low. Meanwhile, the company created a free iPad app that made the *Spotlight Guide* available to audience members. The iPad was more visually vibrant and also proved to be an easier platform for integrating multimedia content and for providing free access to patrons. The Kindle was dropped.

AN ARENA SIMULCAST

During its 2011–2012 season, the final year of grant activity, Seattle Opera took opera outside of the hall.



Opera attendees view photos from previous Seattle Opera productions on a touch-screen kiosk.

A free simulcast of *Madama Butterfly* at a major arena would show the complete opera in a different context to thousands, attracting newcomers, many of whom might decide to attend for reasons only tangentially connected to the performance itself, such as the opportunity to enjoy an unusual social occasion. Because there was no charge, the event also had the potential to attract audiences who might be hesitant to pay for tickets or intimidated by the opera-going experience.

Madama Butterfly was deemed an ideal choice for the event, given its recognizable story line and broad appeal. Seattle Opera held the event at KeyArena, an enclosed stadium that hosts entertainment and sporting events. The City of Seattle donated the space for the simulcast, although Seattle Opera paid to prepare the stadium for the event and for arena staff time. Admission was free. Seattle Opera encouraged advance registration for priority seating. More than 3,000 individuals made reservations. (The capacity of KeyArena for that evening was 8,300.)

Seattle Opera lacked the technology required to record and broadcast HD sound and video on a large scale, so it hired an outside studio and an experienced opera simulcast producer. The performance was captured with seven HD cameras and projected onto a 50-by-80-foot screen (usually used as a backdrop at the opera hall) at one end of the stadium. All told, the budget for producing the event was \$500,000. To help defray the expense, Seattle Opera found additional sponsors. It also negotiated with all of the creative

and artistic unions to project the opera for that one evening free of royalties. To protect subscription or single-ticket sales for *Madama Butterfly*, the company waited until the month before the simulcast to begin marketing the event.

In addition to traditional print advertising in local media outlets and e-mail blasts to its patron database, the broadcast was heavily promoted on social media. Staff identified influential bloggers and “tweeters” in the community by using tools such as Followerwonk and reached out to them directly, asking that they promote the event and become part of the company’s “social press” for the broadcast. The Seattle Opera blog was turned over almost entirely to *Madama Butterfly* for the month leading up to the simulcast. The iPad app was updated and made available.

The simulcast was attended by 5,126 individuals. Two weeks later, surveys were e-mailed to Seattle Opera patrons from the 2011–2012 season and the 3,075 individuals who had not purchased tickets for the season but had registered for and attended the simulcast.

The survey revealed three main categories: loyal patrons (28 percent), infrequent patrons (39 percent) and newcomers (27 percent). Seventy-one percent of the newcomers (19 percent of the total audience) had not seen an opera anywhere in the past two years. The newcomers were younger than both the infrequent and loyal patrons — 37 percent were younger than age 35. For newcomers and infrequent patrons, the largest motivating factor was that the performance was offered free of charge. Large numbers of newcomers also said

they were interested in seeing something “unique and interesting.”

TECH INVESTMENT: THE RESULTS

Seattle Opera began by asking how best to use technology to deepen the engagement of current patrons and reach out to new audiences. Wallace Foundation funding provided the latitude to experiment with a variety of engagement tools. Some were met with success, while others failed to justify the effort and resources expended.

The results show that audience engagement with technology grew over each season, from the *Ring* to *Amelia* to *Madama Butterfly*. That growth was likely the result of two factors: First, Seattle Opera learned how to be more effective, with each year of implementation followed by evaluation research. Second, it takes time for audiences to get used to (and find) online content; they had a learning curve, as well.

Engagement tactics that took audiences behind the scenes were the most effective, though not just any videos would do. Audio-only podcasts taking audiences behind the scenes were not as popular. Audiences responded to written content and visuals that took them inside productions. Large majorities (approximately 85 percent) of those connecting with Seattle Opera on social media in the later years of the initiative — when more content bringing audiences behind the scenes was being delivered — said it enhanced their experience. Audiences were more likely to access Seattle Opera content on the website versus on social media, but the material had an equal impact no matter how people got to it. Interactive forums such as contests, reviewing and sharing were used by fewer people and had less of an impact. *Spotlight Guides* presented logistical issues on the Kindle, but they found a new home on the iPad platform. Seattle Opera continues to watch as simulcast technology changes in ways that may make the approach more attractive to viewers.

Seattle Opera's results need to be understood in the context of its older, highly educated audience. Learning-focused videos, for example, may not have the same appeal for other groups. In fact, Seattle Opera found that even within its usual audience, different segments responded differently: While interactive tools fell flat with older audiences, younger viewers in particular may be more responsive to them. Research consistently shows that younger users of social media are much more interactive than older social media users. Younger Facebook users, for example, are several

times more likely than older Facebook users to update their status, like content and comment on others' posts and photos.

The stadium simulcast brought many new audience members to Seattle Opera, in addition to attracting both frequent and occasional patrons. It also drew a younger audience, which is a challenge for most opera companies. The event removed the price barrier and placed the experience in a casual environment. While Seattle Opera has started to see a small amount of ticket purchases from follow-up marketing efforts, it does not regard the simulcast as a revenue generator. Executive Director Kelly Tweeddale calls the effort a relationship-building tool more than anything else — a “welcome mat” that is the first step in engagement.

A number of factors boosted Seattle

Seattle Opera attempted from the beginning to involve all employees whose work would be touched by the technology initiative, believing that their buy-in and input would be critical to maximize success.

Opera's effectiveness. The company approached each year with a willingness not only to try new things, but also to make changes and to use research to determine when such modifications were necessary. The company's approach demonstrates the hallmarks of successful learning organizations — institutions that are suited to adapting to change.

The Wallace Foundation grant gave staff room to experiment and made them more comfortable with ambiguity about how a particular initiative might pan out. Ongoing assessment of patron engagement and its impact gave Seattle Opera the ability to evaluate and improve tactics. Staff learned to shift resources when surveys revealed considerably less interest in, engagement with and impact from certain tools. As they got a better understanding of what was effective, the staff modified their approach, focusing on self-directed and learning-oriented technology. Each year they had at least some winning engagement tools, driven in large part by their strategy of gathering intelligence before determining which applications to deploy.

Seattle Opera attempted from the beginning to involve all employees whose

work would be touched by the technology initiative, believing that their buy-in and input would be critical to maximize success. Union representatives sat on the technology task force, ensuring that they understood the uses of and goals for digital content, and set the tone for continual give-and-take.

These early conversations helped avoid potential stumbling blocks. Says Tweeddale, “There were a lot of our unions that at the end really thought the end product was great. But when they came in, it was more, ‘Oh, no, this is a whole world that we're not comfortable with,’ and for a lot of the right reasons.” Seattle Opera's strong relationships with its unions and the mutual understanding they developed ultimately made it easier to produce and share high-quality digital content, providing the company with a flexibility not all artistic organizations enjoy.

As the technology initiative stretched further and touched the work of individual artistic and creative staff members, conversations were required sooner rather than later to identify sensitivities. Over time, creative and technical staff members have taken a more active role in the process. They now curate many of the videos, allowing the opera company to take greater advantage of their expertise. They have become drivers of the process.

Perhaps the most important lesson learned was validating that technology is a means to an end, not an end in itself. Deploying technology means understanding what tools are likely to be accessed, by whom and with what impact. What Seattle Opera found is that the key to unlocking technology's potential lay just as much in understanding internal culture and collaboration as it did in designing tactics and understanding their effect. ●

Bob Harlow, a market research expert, leads *The Wallace Foundation's case study project*.

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