

Omaha Under the Radar: Localizing an Experimental Arts Festival

TEACHER NOTES

Learning Objectives

- Recognize the dynamics of a community arts festival.
- Discuss the importance of community partnerships (venues, sponsors, media) in support of a niche arts festivals.
- Develop a targeted marketing campaign for an arts organization on a limited budget.
- Recommend the allocation of an unrestricted gift to an arts organization.

Topics For Discussion

• Local Focus

- ♦ As the case explains, OUtR is focused on promoting local experimental artists and on delivering performances for residents of Omaha who have interest in the avant-garde, and yet the festival's largest expenditure is on out-of-town performers. The question can be considered in terms of the festival's artists and audiences. The artistic work is the product of the festival, but hosting national performers—who comprise half of the festival's lineup—consumes a sizable portion of the festival's annual budget. If community enrichment is a major goal, there are ways to allocate more to outreach initiatives and to boosting attendance. What are ways that the disparity between budget allocation and mission can be addressed?

• Artistic curation

- ♦ Does OUtR succeed in its goal of empowering and enabling local experimental performers? What else could the festival do to encourage an abundance of quality local acts? How can success be measured?
- ♦ In light of the stream of high-profile national applicants each year, how can OUtR continue to emphasize its local performers at the festival? Is the community-centered mission of the festival at odds with the presence of national acts? How can the organizers maintain the collegial atmosphere and mutual respect among performers and mitigate any gulf between local and guest artists?
- ♦ What would be the value of bringing in a "headliner" to generate more local interest among audiences or performers?
- ♦ A stated goal of the board is to increase the representation of dance, theatre, mixed-genre, and interdisciplinary performance at OUtR. What new strategies might reach out to these groups of performers that the festival has yet to attract? Could a new board member assist with this issue?

- **Attracting Local Audiences**

- ♦ Audiences attending OUtR events have been stable, around 1,000 per year. What unintended consequences could accompany a goal of dramatically increasing audiences?
- ♦ Have students reveal how they structured their marketing campaigns for the festival. Given the thin marketing budget year to year, what are the most cost-effective tactics that would reach a larger number of strong prospects in Omaha? Do the approaches emphasize reach (unique encounters with advertising) or frequency (repeated encounters with advertising)? How can the success of the campaigns be measured?

- **Finances and Fundraising**

- ♦ The case describes a scenario of an unrestricted gift of \$15,000 to OUtR, which amounts to more than the annual budget as it currently stands. Probe the students' recommendations to deploy these funds. To what extent do the recommendations capitalize on the mission of the festival? Do they focus on enhanced artistic production or on audience recruitment and community enrichment? Ask students to consider what would change if the gift had restrictions, either for artists (like a national headliner) or for outreach.
 - If one area of expenditures is bolstered with the one-time gift, how will that area fare in future years when budgets return to their usual level? What areas of the festival might see the most long-term benefit from the gift?
 - Amanda DeBoer has expressed a desire to pay the volunteer workers at the festival. Consider whether this should be a top priority for the organization's use of funds.
 - If OUtR received a "transformative" gift, for example from an estate, instead of a one-time gift, how could this change the entire organization? Should the mission ever be adjusted or compromised if there were restrictions on a transformative gift?
 - Aubrey Byerly, who oversees the finances of OUtR, is looking for ways to show revenue growth with festival, despite its concentration on local audiences and its niche artistic category. DeBoer has suggested that the festival explore corporate sponsors. For example, Farnam House Brewing Company already donates kegs of beer year to the festival. Byerly and DeBoer would like to develop more prospects to approach. What kinds of sponsors will make the best match for OUtR events? What can be offered to the sponsor? What kinds of proposals could be drawn up for corporate sponsorship?

- **Outreach**

- ♦ The case reveals OUtR's educational workshop series known as Soundry, which runs concurrently with the events of the festival. In this forum, festival artists teach community members about exploring sound art and other creative practices. The reception of the workshops has been strong, and tuition collected from Soundry not only covers the compensation of the instructors but also contributes additional revenue to the festival. Soundry serves two groups with separate programs: "Soundry Explore" targets high school students, and "Soundry Create" is a summer institute geared for college students that runs the full week of the festival. Stacy Barelos, who supervises outreach efforts for OUtR, has been surprised by the enthusiasm for these programs and intends to expand them. What other demographic targets might be considered, now that high school and college students have been addressed in the current programs? Or should those programs simply be expanded during or beyond OUtR's summer festival? Would program expansion ultimately translate into increased community engagement and attendance at the festival? Should the Soundry programs be run outside of Omaha?
 - Soundry has been focused squarely on the discovery of musical sound art, yet the festival encompasses more than music. At what point should Barelos consider other fine arts disciplines, such as dance, theater, and other hybrid genres including multimedia in the scope of Soundry?