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Small Town, Big Prize: Building the Audience for the MostArts Festival



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Small Town, Big Prize: Building the Audience for the MostArts Festival

The MostArts festival is an annual piano competition in the small town of Alfred, New York. The festival awards a \$10,000 grand prize in its Young Pianist Competition, the centerpiece of the week's events. In addition to its student competitors, MostArts hosts professional pianists, who perform, adjudicate, and lead master classes. The case not only reveals the festival's close ties to the community but also its distinctive programming, which extends beyond musical events to broader arts education offerings. Growing attendance for MostArts is a major priority for the festival's founder and director, Lisa Lantz. The case challenges the reader to develop a marketing plan for Lantz in order to build the festival audience.



This case study was prepared by Benjamin Johns, a professional singer and Doctor of Musical Arts student in Choral Conducting. *The Eastman Case Studies* are developed solely as the basis for class discussion. Cases are not intended to serve as endorsements or sources of primary data nor are they to serve as illustrations of effective or ineffective leadership or decision making.

MostArts, Mozart & Other Arts

The MostArts Festival began in 2014 as a one-week summer piano competition, under the auspices of Alfred University in the small town of Alfred in the Southern Tier region of New York State, about 25 miles north of the Pennsylvania border. The festival's annual \$10,000 grand prize is helping to cultivate the next generation of artists. Performing alongside the competitors are pianists of international reputation. Andreas Klein and GRAMMY®-winner Angelin Chang, for example, return regularly to the festival to perform, adjudicate, and lead master classes.

The MostArts Festival puts student competitors and their performances of Mozart piano concertos at the heart of its musical programming. Most concerts during the week include either a composition by Mozart or a student performance (often both), and the programming matches repertoire offered by top professional orchestras. The festival opens

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with a symphonic concert that features a concerto performance from the winner of the previous year. Competition judges perform concertos early in the week to demonstrate professional-level performance. A free noon concert series also showcases the festival

chamber orchestra on a daily basis. Meantime, each concert models a musical tradition for the competitors and folds the students into the series by week's end.

The festival builds to a climax with its Young Pianist Competition situated near the end of the week. Patrons interested in the outcome of the competition will not miss the final concerto concert where the winners are announced. For classical music enthusiasts, there is an unmatched sense of excitement and

optimism associated with witnessing accomplished young musical artists performing live at a very high level. Juxtaposing the competition with other professional music concerts allows the audience to recognize the journey from talented amateur to professional musician.

The MostArts Festival attracts remarkable talent. Eight finalists of high school age are selected by video audition three months in advance of the festival. Applicants submit the second and third movements of any Mozart piano concerto, accompanied either by piano or orchestra, and 20-25 minutes of virtuosic and stylistically-varied solo recital repertoire. Finalists heading into the competition often have résumés that include appearances on NPR's *From the Top*, grand prizes from international piano competitions, and private instruction from university professors. The 2018 first place winner was a thirteen-year-old who studied at The Juilliard School's Pre-College Division for three years. As a result of winning the Young Pianist Competition, he not only received the \$10,000 grand prize, but is also eligible to become a Steinway Young Artist. Second and third place winners receive \$5,000 and \$2,500, respectively. Two \$500 audience favorite awards go to the most moving Mozart concerto performance of the week.

The small town atmosphere of the MostArts Festival is affected by the scant population of the surrounding area: Alfred, New York has just over 1,200 permanent residents. Festival patrons are predominantly locals, and many are not well versed in classical music. While classical music plays a central role at the summer festival, Founder and Director Lisa Lantz has aimed for an educational and interdisciplinary angle to the events of the week, offering workshops covering a wide variety of other "arts" for which Alfred University is well known. The early festivals incorporated seminars in ceramics and glassblowing, a logical choice as Alfred University has been a center for

ceramic arts since the turn of the twentieth century. In 2016, the festival inaugurated the Alfred Art Park, which presents sculptures year round by Alfred University students and faculty.

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- Lisa Lantz

Today, faculty from Alfred University's School of Art and Design offer one- to four-week workshops in ceramics, glass-blowing, and digital art, which attract national and international participants. The MostArts Festival offers its own daily workshops in music, floral arranging, culinary arts, visual arts, and creative writing—all interwoven amid the week's musical programming. The mingling of these arts seems to have driven the festival's success in its first five years. Lantz remarked, "If

we as professional musicians don't do something to inspire this generation and the next generation of performers and supporters of music in our country, we as professional orchestral musicians are going to become dinosaurs. We all have to strive to reach out to new people with our music profession. In addition, this area is one of the poorest and underserved counties in New York State. For many of our audience members, the MostArts Festival has been their first encounter with live classical music."

According to its mission statement, the MostArts Festival is "established as an advocate for cultural enrichment. The Festival's home at Alfred University signifies the importance and commitment to the economic development of the Southern Tier region of New York State." The MostArts Festival brand therefore serves, in part, a social purpose: it enriches

the community not only by preserving the musical arts but also by providing an economic engine for the region. To this end, Lisa Lantz has endeavored to create a "destination" summer festival meant to bring together local audiences, businesses, musicians, and Alfred University staff and student body in support of the multidisciplinary arts events of the MostArts Festival. She runs the festival with a network of community volunteers and an intern from Alfred University's College of Business. Participation from community leaders has further been a boon. Each year, the mayor gives a welcome at the festival's opening gala, and the president of Alfred University delivers remarks at the closing concert event. Musicians routinely mingle with the largely local audience after every concert, reinforcing the spirit of the local community that infuses festival offerings.

MostArts Festival has an annual budget of \$150,000. The \$10,000 grand prize comes from a private donor. Corporate and foundation grants, individual donations, and ticket sales generate the rest of the festival's annual income. (To date, the festival has not received state or federal grant funding.) Alfred University, as a parent organization to the festival, covers any budget shortfalls until funds are raised to fill the gap. Aside from the prize money, the largest disbursement for the festival is performance fees and housing for the orchestra, soloists, and conductor. To cut costs, Lantz has not taken a salary, even though she conducts and plays in the orchestra on top of yearlong fundraising and festival administration responsibilities. With the influx of more than 100 performers, local food services and hotels enjoy healthy revenue during the festival week.

Ticket prices for MostArts Festival events are necessarily low in order to allow community access. Much of the financial planning in the past was done on faith that townspeople would attend, buy tickets, and donate. It seems that faith was well placed. As the festival

continues to expand its non-musical programming each year, its audience continues to grow. Within its first five years, the audience for MostArts doubled in size. Lantz's primary goal and biggest challenge is to continue growing the patronage of the MostArts Festival, retaining loyal arts supporters while reaching new audiences.

Joining Art to Community

The programming offered by a performing arts organization defines its brand first and foremost. Lantz has considered three approaches to programming that not only are artistically satisfying but also reflect the commitment to the local Alfred community from the festival's mission. First, she unifies artistic goals with the need to foster a new generation of musicians and music enthusiasts. Second, the number and range of non-musical arts activities supports both a local ownership and appeal that stretches beyond music. Finally, festival programming is designed to be accessible and engaging.

Many organizations today balance social causes with unencumbered artistic productions, and the MostArts Festival is no different. With a competition design that focuses on supporting young artists rather than cutthroat achievement, the festival accomplishes both goals without sacrificing artistic integrity. In fact, the "model as education" feature demands that performances represent the highest standard of artistic achievement so that students are inspired to continue pursuing a music career whether they win the competition or not.

For MostArts, the influence extends beyond music as a career for its featured young artists and into music as a vehicle for social change. Shortly after winning the grand prize in 2016, Derek Chung picked up on Lantz's design and started his own charitable music organization with some of his fellow competitors. In a letter to Lantz following his performances, Chung wrote, "MostArts played an important role

in our decision to start a charity organization. . . The orchestra was musicians from across the world. The audience was from different backgrounds, everyone coming together through music and arts and inspiring a community. . . Despite what we as a group have accomplished as pianists, we wanted our legacy to be defined by contribution, not accomplishment."

Some critics of those who use arts for social change worry about "coercive philanthropy," the idea that expecting the arts to provide social change removes the onus of improving society from the political arena and places it onto the arts. It is difficult, however, to argue against the positive overtones of Chung's anecdote: the MostArts Festival inspired an individual to become more civically engaged.

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Beyond the young artists nurtured by the festival, Lantz believes strongly that young children are an essential audience to develop. She averred, "These are our future concertgoers, musicians, and supporters of the arts and music." In some ways, classical music concerts inherently are not conducive to attracting young children. In fact, children under seven years old are not permitted to attend the evening concerts at MostArts events; sitting quietly for more than an hour is difficult for most under that age. Lantz therefore developed the noon concert series to draw young children to MostArts.

The noon concerts are free, informal, and brief (lasting no longer than an hour) and therefore have attracted more families. By introducing children to concerts in these less formal situations, the hope is that they will passively learn audience behavior norms while still hearing top quality, live classical music.

Some local residents bring their grandchildren to participate in the festival's workshops in other artistic disciplines. In the last two festivals, Lantz programmed child-friendly workshops in the visual arts, including Fossilized Bowls, Animated Vessels, and "The Art of Nature" Children's Mural Project. These offerings are aligned so that attendees can move on directly to free musical events nearby. The goal is to immerse children in a wide-ranging environment of artistic discovery so that, among other things, they might develop a lifelong appreciation not just for music but also for the fine arts more generally.

Lantz also draws young children to MostArts by asking children's organizations to volunteer to help the festival. Students in Alfred University's Jr. Strings Program (ages five to fifteen years old) receive free concert admission if they hand out concert programs. Local Cub Scouts and Boys Scouts eagerly sign up to guard the Van Cliburn and Horowitz Steinway grand pianos that are positioned by the festival box office. By accomplishing tasks associated with the festival, children develop a sense of ownership of the MostArts events.

Program Appeal

Embracing the "advocate for cultural enrichment" clause of its mission statement, MostArts offers events that venture beyond classical music peddled on the festival stage. The non-musical workshops targeted toward children are just one example. For members of the local community who may not be lured by classical music, events like the "Music Under the Stars" are a popular draw. This event features a community barbecue, a guided tour of eleven local art galleries, and a DJ-hosted dance. Attendance for "Music Under the Stars" increased from 150 in 2014 to 400 in 2018. About 250 people now attend the "Raku Extravaganza," where participants decorate and fire-glaze their own ceramic pots for free. The 2018 festival featured workshops in floral arranging from the home garden, creative writing, capturing

nature in visual art, fruit sculpturing, and cooking. Out of 40 events now offered during the week, non-concert artistic events now outnumber pure concerts by a ratio of 3:2.

At every turn, festival activities are designed to keep participants interested and returning. Hands-on workshops often provide something tangible to take away, like a clay pot or new culinary creation, reinforcing a personal connection to MostArts. The "something for everyone" strategy allows patrons to choose what they want and maximize their involvement with the festival. Lantz is working to capitalize on cross-marketing non-musical events with classical music. If the programming is not precisely intermingled, she may simply try to drive audience from one arts event to an expressly musical one. In her description of the Upstate Classics cooking workshop, for example, she suggests that participants head over to the hear Beethoven's *Piano Concerto No. 4* with soloist Andreas Klein.

Unveiling persuasive programming across the arts would mean little if MostArts did not create multiple points of access to the festival's events. Concert times are scattered throughout the day, from the free chamber series at noon and the solo portions of the competition at 2:00pm and 4:00pm, to evening carillon recitals leading up to marquee concerts at 7:30pm. The pricing for concerts, however remains simple: the evening concert series requires purchased tickets, while all daytime concerts are free. Evening events vary from formal classical concerts to "Music Under the Stars." Noon concerts allow patrons to eat during the concert, ideal for those who work locally and can get away for lunch. These broad strategies designed for access and engagement have likely

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played a role in increased audience and retention. Audience engagement in the festival's concert hall is matched by engagement of patrons outside of the events. For instance, Lantz has organized greeters outside of the concerts to make returning patrons and first-timers alike feel welcome. Further, post-concert meet-and-greets promote camaraderie between the artists and the audience and emphasize access and personal connection to the musical offerings. The collaboration even extends beyond the festival week. Lantz regularly sees patrons around town throughout the year who relate their experiences at MostArts. Thanks to this small-town perk, she has been able to incorporate worthy suggestions and raise funds.

Sustaining MostArts

In 2017, Lantz secured a \$100,000 matching grant from a private foundation. Her strategy to match the funding involved a social media campaign and a personal appeal to music supporters she knows in the Alfred community. Lantz raised \$30,000 toward the match in the last three weeks of 2017, completing the full match in less than a year. The final push emphasized the benefits of a tax-deductible gift before the year's end. Personalized engagement as an integrated feature of the small-town atmosphere has made the MostArts experience more meaningful to local patrons.

Even though the festival has grown over its first five years, Lantz recognizes that MostArts survives on

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ticket sales and donations. As the festival heads toward its sixth year, she is eager to raise the attendance figures. Her hope is for the festival to become fully self-sustaining, without the backing of Alfred University. As the organization's executive director with no office

staff, she has little time to collect quantitative data such as purchasing behavior or to investigate obstacles to attendance and potential competition. She does have qualitative insight into audience values from her experience at the head of MostArts. Her focus for the first five years of the festival has been on developing festival programming and community support for the annual event. She believes a targeted marketing campaign could be developed to increase festival attendance. In order to grow the audience of MostArts, Lantz consulted some industry contacts and eventually developed two key questions she wanted to answer about the festival: (1) who is the audience? and (2) what barriers prevent larger audiences at the festival?

Audience

There are three discernible audience segments for the MostArts Festival: residents in or near the town of Alfred; students who attend college in Alfred; and patrons who travel more than 15 miles to attend the MostArts Festival. Census information estimates that the population of Alfred, New York was 5,096 in 2016, a figure which counts a portion of the university student population. The combined student population of Alfred University (2,000) and Alfred State University (3,700) far exceeds the town population. Once attendance of Alfred residents is maximized, the next largely untapped market for expanding the MostArts audience is the student population. Of all incoming first-year students, 80% reside in the state of New York, but only a handful of those reside in Allegany County where Alfred is situated. While most students are away during the summer, the festival's timing could shift from mid-July to the end of August to intersect with the start of the school year. Before drastic changes to the program are considered, however, a clearer picture of the existing MostArts audience is needed.

Thanks to a feature of the credit card service used by the festival in 2016 and 2017, Lantz obtained

information about the MostArts Festival customers. The service captured the patron's first and last name, billing address, and email address. She plans to use this information to inform future marketing campaigns. From the billing address, she could surmise to some degree who attends the festival and where future marketing energy might be directed. Unfortunately, the credit card service did not provide dates of purchase, the amount of the purchase, or event purchased. The credit segment data represents 163 purchasing individuals and 250 total sales (**Appendix 1**).

As expected, the vast majority of attendees who paid by credit card have a billing address in New York State. 72% of sales come from residents within a 15-mile radius of Alfred (**Appendix 2**). Surprising perhaps is that 10% of the credit card purchasers—roughly 15 individuals in this set—have billing addresses in states other than New York. Even though Pennsylvania is a 30-minute

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drive south of Alfred, only two individuals with credit card purchases could be tracked from that state. However, at least two purchases were also noted in nine other states, including Texas and Alaska (**Appendix 1**). Knowing more about the out-of-state audience will provide insight into an untapped market. What brought these out-of-state attendees to the festival? Are they friends or family of performers? Or did they hear about it through some form of communication?

Most of the out-of-state attendees from the credit segment were either the only individual to attend from their state, or likely attended with a friend or family member. (The assumption is that individuals with the same last name and/or billing address attended together.) Applying this assumption to the full data

set, 73 sales (26%) were accompanied by a friend or family member, and 32 of those sales returned. Census data estimates about 40% of Alfred's population to be married and living together, slightly lower than the national average. This data points to a significant audience segment which attends the MostArts Festival in groups. A marketing strategy that focuses on the family and social aspects of the festival could boost sales.

About one-third of all sales (20% of individual sales, i.e. not counting multiples) were made by someone with either an alfred.edu or alfredstate.edu email address. This supports the notion that a significant portion of the audience is tied to the local universities. Lantz wonders if these sales come from faculty, staff, or students. University staff are most likely to stay in town year round, and students are most likely to leave for the summer. Would faculty and students be even more inclined to attend the festival if there were more summer school classes or if the festival expanded to a second week with its own chamber music workshops and masterclasses?

Barriers

The largest presumed barrier to growing the MostArts audience is its rural geography and the inability of the festival to draw out-of-towners from any distance. MostArts might well have maximized its audience from the small town of Alfred. More than a quarter of credit-card sales (28%) come from non-residents, that is, those living more than 15 miles from Alfred. Lantz believes that distance can be mitigated in two ways: (1) by increasing value for non-residents (in the form of discounts or targeted programming), and (2) by

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coordinating the festival with another regional draw. A third option, to relocate the festival or have satellites, was proposed by a consultant. This last option seems untenable, as it runs against the MostArts mission to enrich the local economy of the town of Alfred.

Lantz continues to lay groundwork for maximum engagement with the local and regional audience, which is essential to growing the patrons of the MostArts Festival. The town of Alfred may already lure people from great distances who know the town for its ceramic arts. A festival in summer eases the travel barrier somewhat. Connecting with other summer music festivals in the state—namely, the opera company of the Glimmerglass Festival and the extensive summer arts activities at the Chautauqua Institution—could create a state-wide summer arts tour initiative that runs through Alfred.

At the moment, Lantz does not perceive any competition to the MostArts Festival. Combining a piano competition with various internationally renowned performers, an international orchestra, live concerts, and other arts workshops is a novel idea. Other festivals in the region are not in direct competition. Getting the word out not only locally but also regionally seems to be the greatest challenge at present.

Looking Forward

To date, Lisa Lantz has used her experience and intuition when making decisions regarding programming for the MostArts Festival. Her picture of the audience was a result of personal interaction and anecdotal evidence. Festival content was driven by her general impression of what people in and around Alfred would be interested in and what she and her colleagues wanted to program. A robust strategy to inform future programming would require extensive audience surveys, more comprehensive collection of purchase data, and an analyst to manage and interpret the new information. Using the

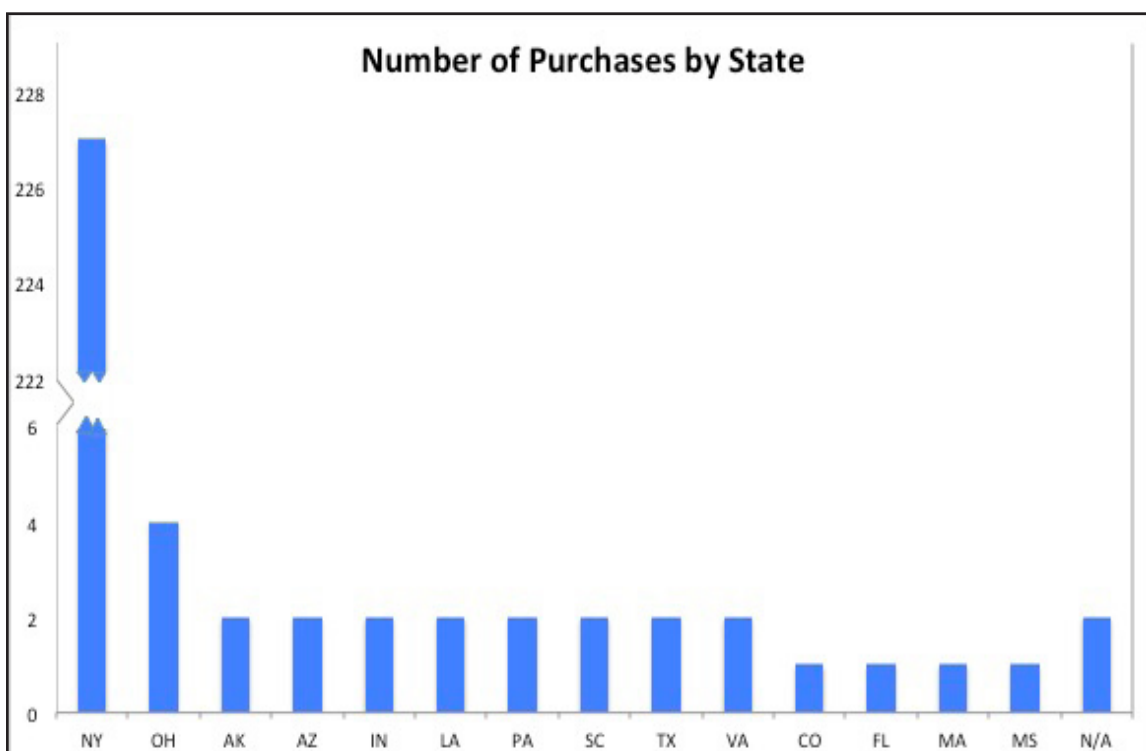
business school intern as an analyst will solve some unknowns about the MostArts audience, but direction will have to come from Lantz.

Even in the absence of a full audience study, Lantz is aiming to improve her marketing campaign for the next season. Advertising for past festivals was limited to some posters, word of mouth, and social media. Between \$5,000 and 7,000 per year of the festival budget has been allocated to marketing in years past. Moving forward, Lantz plans allocate \$10,000-15,000 toward marketing. She has full responsibility for the design and media planning of the advertising. Lantz wonders what audience or groups should be targeted; what should be communicated in the advertising; and what media would be most effective for increasing attendance for the MostArts Festival in the year ahead.

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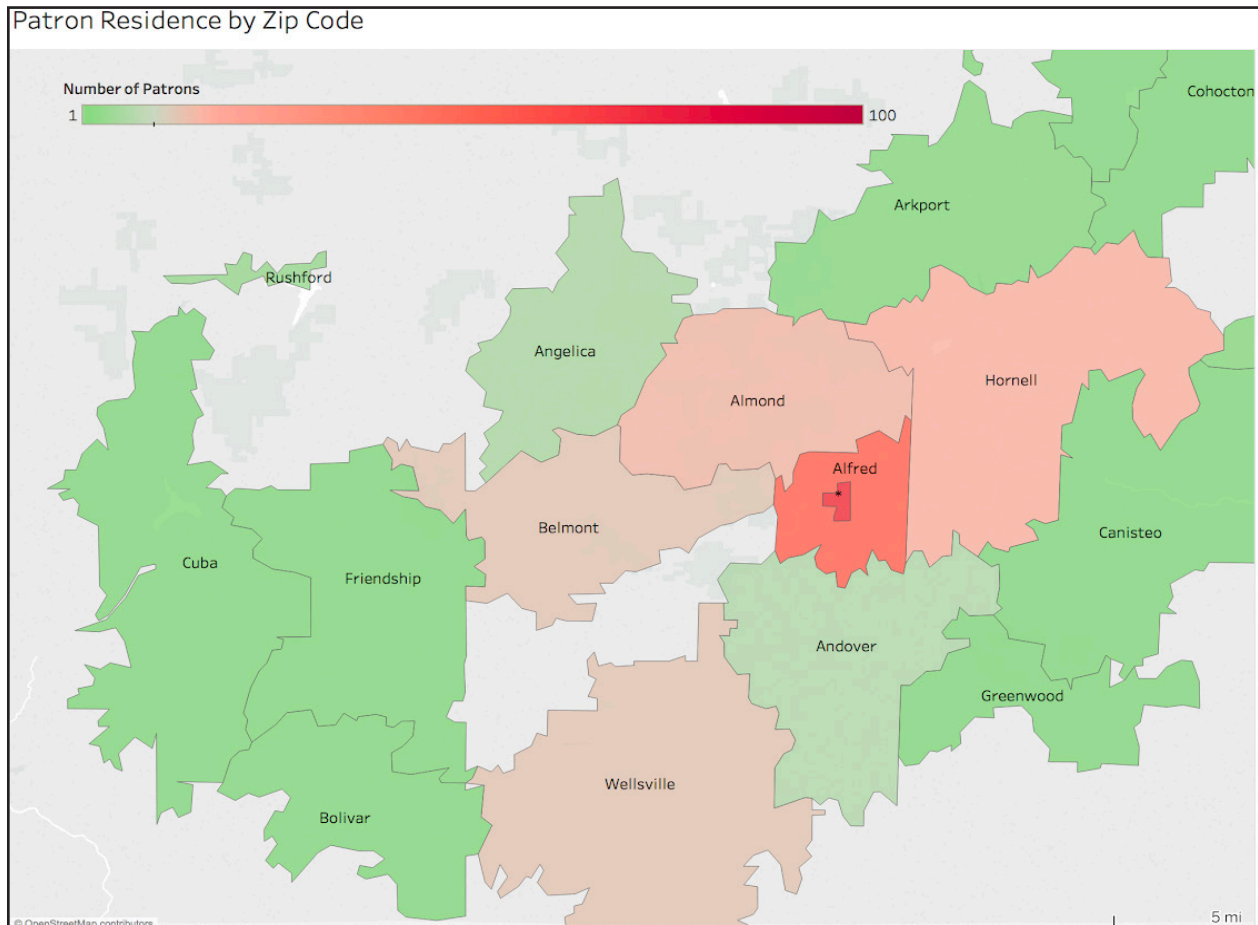
APPENDIX 1

Credit Card Purchases by State for MostArts (2016, 2017)



APPENDIX 2

Credit Card purchases for the MostArts Festival, near Alfred, NY using billing zip code data, towns indicated (2016, 2017)





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