ENGAGING NOW

A SNAPSHOT OF AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES AND TACTICS UNDERTAKEN BY THEATRES WHO HAVE PARTICIPATED IN THE INTRINSIC IMPACT STUDY

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FOREWORD

Over the past 10 years the theatre field has awakened to the value and importance of audience feedback.

WolfBrown’s collaboration with Theatre Bay Area (TBA) began in 2009, culminating in a large-scale study of the impact on audiences of 58 different theatrical productions mounted by 18 companies. Counting New Beans: Intrinsic Impact and the Value of Art, Theatre Bay Area’s groundbreaking book, built on a body of Intrinsic Impact research conducted by WolfBrown since 2004, and changed the conversation about impact.

Interest in impact assessment has grown steadily over the years. Theatre Bay Area launched several follow-up initiatives to support nonprofit theatres in building capacity for impact assessment, and WolfBrown continues to support a wide array of regional theatres, youth theatres, orchestras, museums, and presenters in gathering program-level feedback from audiences. This summer, Chorus America, the national service organization for the choral field, will release the results of a two-year study of the audience impact of 136 different choral music programs offered by 23 choruses across the US.

In reading Alli Houseworth’s analysis of interviews with theatres who participated in TBA’s early Intrinsic Impact work, it is most heartening to see that the vocabulary of Intrinsic Impact is very much alive and well—words and phrases like “building anticipation” and “captivation.”

In Making Sense of Audience Engagement, WolfBrown’s 2011 report for the San
Francisco Foundation, audience feedback is conceptualized as a milestone in the “arc of engagement.” The act of reflecting critically on an arts experience (i.e., during a talk-back session, or by taking a survey afterwards) is, itself, part and parcel of the arts experience. In this sense, audience engagement and the process of gathering audience feedback overlap.

Alli’s analysis shows that participating theatres’ commitment to audience engagement predated the Intrinsic Impact work, and survives it. Yet, there is anecdotal evidence that learnings from the research are still resonating, as reflected in refinements to engagement practices and a strengthened resolve to deepen impact through engagement.

The role of audience feedback in an artistically driven organization is still debated, and always should be. Audiences, for their part, value the opportunity to provide feedback. What we allow ourselves to learn from them will most certainly influence our success as a field.

Alan Brown, Principal
WolfBrown
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INTRODUCTION

A Brief Overview of the Intrinsic Impact Research Project

In 2011, Theatre Bay Area commissioned the research firm WolfBrown to conduct a nationwide study on the intrinsic impact of the theatre experience on the audience. The study’s goal was to refine our understanding of how to measure the intellectual, emotional, social, and empathetic effect of art on an individual using standard metrics and a common vocabulary. Employing five measurement indices (captivation, intellectual stimulation, emotional resonance, aesthetic enrichment, and social bonding), we worked closely with the staffs of participating theatres across the country to construct and execute customized surveys reflective of the mission, values, and core competencies of each organization.

In Phase I of our research, we distributed over 60,000 surveys at 58 performances produced by 18 theatres in six metro areas across the country. We received approximately 19,000 responses; the per-company response rate averaged 45%, double the average rate anticipated at the project’s outset. Using a web-based dashboard interface, we consulted with companies about their audience’s responses shortly after surveying was completed. We also conducted teleconference conversations with groups of the participating companies to encourage conversations within the cohort. WolfBrown wrote a final report about this phase of the project, released in March 2012, as part of the book *Counting New Beans: Intrinsic Impact and the Value of Art*, which was introduced to the field via a six-city book tour.

Theatre Bay Area and WolfBrown then completed Phase II of the Project in which we gathered intrinsic impact data at 30 theatres across the country, surveying
approximately 80 productions. The findings from that research was further disseminated at various conferences, on TBA’s website, and in magazines and blogs such as American Theatre and Howlround. Further during this phase, a database was constructed that holds the survey results, an administrative back-end set-up tool was built, and a web-based user interface was created that the study companies could access to view their results. Subsequently the database was linked to a customized web-based surveying tool that allows companies to exchange paper survey tools for email questionnaires, giving them next-day intrinsic impact survey feedback. Additionally, WolfBrown developed www.intrinsicimpact.org, a free resource full of information on intrinsic impact. The site also serves as the portal to accessing the online dashboard tool.

The research continued into a third phase with Theatre Bay Area focusing its efforts on theatre companies in its San Francisco Bay Area service area (primarily small and mid-sized companies), while WolfBrown extended the research to more theatres nationwide and to larger-budget companies in the Bay Area. That research is ongoing.

The Intrinsic Impact Research Project, in its three phases, has been supported by generous grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, and more than a dozen regional funders.

**The Methods and Aims of this Report**

As a service organization, we at Theatre Bay Area have hoped from the very start of this project that the insights gained from intrinsic impact research would lead
theatre practitioners to change the way they think about their audiences, change the way they define success, and change the way they approach engagement. And we quickly found that theatre companies were just as eager to take their survey findings and move to actionable next steps. Very often they asked us what their fellow research participants were doing differently as a result of the research. Practitioners were in a hurry to find new methods to strengthen the impact of their work and deepen engagement with their audiences. They wanted to learn from each other and we wanted to learn from them.

As part of Phase III of this Project, we set out to conduct a scan of theatres across the country that had participated in the impact research. We wanted to know if and how the research had affected the way they think about their audiences, how they talk about the success of their work, and what they were doing to deepen engagement. Over the course of two years, we reached out to over 50 companies that had participated in the research and surveyed the 17 who agreed to participate in the creation of this report. We conducted hour-long interviews with representatives from each of these companies. The content of those surveys and interviews are the core of this report.

How this Report is Organized

Several trends emerged from our conversations with the 17 companies we interviewed and each of those trends can be found in this paper. At first you can read about how intrinsic impact has changed the way the companies think and how they talk with each other internally, or with external stakeholders (including funders).
From there we’ll uncover what these companies said about their staffing structure, staff engagement, and hiring practices. The paper will then reveal specific audience engagement strategies and tactics these companies are undertaking in the areas of: website and web content; social media and video; emails; programs; lobbies; pre- and post-show conversations; activities insides and outside the theatre’s walls; relationships with communities members; ticketing; and we’ll conclude with some challenges. A full list of interviewees can be found at the end of this paper.

**What We Hope You’ll Take Away**

Since we began this project more than five years ago, we have seen profound changes in the way the American theatre approaches and values audience engagement. No longer assigned just to the marketing department, the work of engaging audiences—and deepening the impact of the work on stage—is becoming everyone’s job, very much including the artistic side of the house. It’s no exaggeration to say that there has been a paradigm shift in attitudes and understanding. Our research into the intrinsic impact of the theatre experience on the audience was not responsible for this shift. But it does fit into a new zeitgeist. Our hope is that this report will present readers with a close-up perspective on the work, provide snapshots of theatres that are innovating with new approaches inspired by fresh insights, offer practitioners new ideas to try at their own theatres, and give researchers and funders a new appreciation for the value of this kind of research and a feel for the complexities, challenges, and rewards for the artsmakers who participate.
NEW WAYS TO THINK

The majority of organizations who were interviewed for this paper had already started down a path of thinking about their audiences in new ways before their participation with the Intrinsic Impact study began. Some had started to carve the path of audience engagement, while for others their participation in the Study brought to light assumptions they had just started to have. These latter organizations had a hunch audience engagement was becoming more and more important, not only in the field, but in their audiences’ value set as well. For some those assumptions led them to make powerful change.

Rayna Adams, the marketing director at Bristol Riverside Theatre in Bucks County Pennsylvania recalls:

We had a show that season that had a puppet in it and the survey participants couldn’t get past the fact that there was someone on stage with the puppet. We realized, to us, we didn’t even think about that, but our audience was really focused on this person on stage. Now we make sure things, our marketing language, is simple and to the point. We didn’t even think that people would be so concerned with that person on stage, with the puppet. We learned our audiences wanted to learn more about the show so we’ve altered the way we talk about our work.

At Arena Stage in Washington, DC the Intrinsic Impact findings showed them older audiences were more interested in the newer plays than younger audiences, which broke a longstanding belief they had that younger audiences would be naturally more interested in new plays. The Arena staff realized that the older audiences want to see
something they haven’t experienced, while their younger audiences wanted to see the classics they had read in schools.

The 52nd Street Project in New York City was just starting to expand their audience engagement efforts when they participated in the study. The findings helped the organization conceive of their new membership program, which today is a couple years old. Their membership model is uniquely challenging particularly because everything the Project does is free. The organization used the responses from the survey to help shape the membership program that was ultimately launched a year after they participated in the study. Today the membership program is still growing and morphing, but in its present state includes several opportunities for members to engage with artists and each other, examples of which are discussed throughout this paper. “We’re still trying out different benefits,” says John Sheehy, the director of development and marketing for the Project, “but the Intrinsic Impact Study was definitely a factor crafting this program.”

Similarly, five or six years ago (which was just a couple of years before they participated in the Intrinsic Impact Study), People’s Light, a professional theatre in Chester County, Pennsylvania, implemented a long-range strategic plan where reciprocity with audiences was at the core. The plan amplified audience engagement and new approaches to doing programming and non-programming related activities. Today they call this work “surround programming” and they utilize it in some capacity for every production.

Around the same time the People’s Light strategic plan was implemented, Diane Paulus took over as the artistic director at American Repertory Theater in Cambridge,
MA. Brendan Shea, A.R.T.’s education and community programs associate says:

Today we think about audiences completely differently than we did prior to when Diane came on board, which was right before we participated in the study. Diane’s vision is audience-centric and she always thinks about how audience engage with work on stage. Looking back, I think Diane was really pushing for the type of audience and community engagement work that’s commonplace these days and is the trend.

At Orlando Shakespeare Theater, they had begun discussing the observation that people today are coming to the theatre as an event or experience rather than going to theatre simply for theatre’s, or art’s, sake. “The study really drove that home to me,” says Melissa Mason Braillard, director of marketing communications, “Whether it’s for children’s programming or adult programming, if we can surround the show itself with something interesting before and after, audiences are more likely to attend and come back to see us again. I know once they come here once they will come back because our quality is excellent and surprising. They see our little 525 seat theatre and they’re surprised. Pleasantly surprised 90% of the time. Now I’m always thinking about how can I get the audience more invested or more involved.”

“We’ve always done a lot of community outreach but after the study we continued to think of ways to actually engage the community in different, deeper, more active ways,” says Torange Yeghiazarian, founding artistic director at Golden Thread, the first American theatre company focused on the Middle East. “It’s a bit tricky because it’s not like we’re going to go them and say ‘Hey help us choose our next play,’ but we are involving them in a conversation in an ongoing basis whether it’s on social media or in
our lobby. We’re continuing the conversation with the audiences in a more active and intentional way than before.”

NEW WAYS TO TALK

Not only did the Intrinsic Impact Study get theatre companies to think differently, in many cases it got them to talk differently as well—not just in how they frame conversations with audiences, but how theatre staff and artists speak internally with each other and how they structure discussions with their boards as well. Aside from the phrase “intrinsic impact,” the Intrinsic Impact study introduced language such as “contextualization,” “preparation,” “anticipation,” “social bonding,” and more into the language of the field.

At A.R.T. Brendan Shea relates they use this language from the Study, mostly when they speak about building anticipation in their audiences:

There was a question in the survey, 'After the show did you talk about the show with the people you came with?' We saw a direct correlation between that and loyalty. We saw that those people who had intense conversations always had a significantly better experience, they were more likely to come back, more likely to become fans, more likely to become more engaged and invested. When developing programming now we ask ourselves, does this event or activity increase anticipation or captivation or does it have no effect at all? Is there a way social bridging happens most effectively and efficiently outside the theatre space? How does it carry over to inside the space? We’ve guided everything—mostly our lobby experiences—everything we do in pre-
and post-show emails are motivated by a powerful unobtrusive framework for what has happened on stage.

Lauren Chavez, managing director of We Players, a San Francisco Bay Area-based company that presents site-integrated performance events, says the Study reinforced their observation that a lot of people who are coming to their projects are coming to the park sites for the first time, or that they want to go back afterwards:

There’s a desire for our audience to have more engagement with place so we’re asking ourselves how can we support that. The company is now doing more target marketing to neighbors nearby the park sites—looking at zip codes, talking about performances in local newspapers and local blogs. The survey results have been useful for us in communicating audiences’ engagement with place to our park partners. The parks love to see that 80% of survey respondents came to the park for the first time; that 40% say they want to come back. These numbers are really useful for us in talking about our impact to our park partners. We use the stats in conversations with potential partners and printed some of our impact stats from the survey in a hardcopy media piece that was instrumental to communicate who we are to the national parks of New York harbor (where the company will be performing in late 2016).

Lisa Mallette, artistic director at City Lights Theater Company in San Jose, CA, says the language they learned from the Intrinsic Impact project is woven through all of their communications:

We don’t send out one grant now that doesn’t touch on it. Not all funders are
really caught up on what intrinsic impact means, but we’re going to keep talking about it. We say, 'In addition to reaching this many people and generating this much revenue, in addition to that we have touched people.' It’s hard to make that shift in our language but we do it in every small way we can. It’s become part of the way the organization works so it naturally comes out of us. Our board has really bought into what we’re trying to do. They have become one with the mission and it’s brought the board and staff together in a great way.

John Sheehy at the 52nd Street Project says they also use intrinsic impact language when writing grants. In fact, they’ve seen such an increase in intrinsic impact that they’ve launched an investigation into the impact of their programs on the children that participate. A series of questions is administered to the kids before they start participating and at the end of the program the questions are asked of the kids again, as well as everyone at the Project.

The concept of a dynamic exchange between artist and audience has long been a core value of the Project. Sheehy explains:

There’s a thing called the “gift economy.” The way our artistic director puts it is, 'I have something to offer you and you have something to offer me.' I wouldn’t say this way to talk is a part of the experience of the survey but it’s been concurrent. It’s definitely part of the zeitgeist of the last five years or so. Our motto is ‘We all belong, we all get along.’ It extends to everything we do. It covers a multitude of situations. It’s a mantra between kids, staff and programming, but it’s communicated to our audience as well. It’s the social
experience of coming to the Project and being part of the community. Everything we do is about the kids’ success. The audience laughs or applauds along. The experience of the audience, and giving that to the kids as they give over the art, is the ultimate exchange. The audience is part of the programming too. They are there to offer either validation or approval. It’s all very explicit part of coming to the Project.

For Rachel Hull, director of education and community enrichment at Dallas Theatre Center, the language used in the Study also bleeds into a larger philosophy that’s permeates their engagement work. She says:

When you are intentional with your invitation and with your heart you go into the community and you know how to speak the language. No matter who we are, we can start with the heart and move to the head. We had to make our home warm and welcoming. The word intentional is smart. What we’ve learned is it’s important to be transparent about wanting a deeper relationship at every corner. When you do this type of work you have to do it in a way that’s genuine, otherwise the community will call you on your shit.

**IMPORTANT OF PEOPLE AND STAFF**

Later in this paper we discuss some challenges that come along with doing audience engagement work. Unsurprisingly, the two biggest barriers for companies doing more audience engagement work are the lack of resources—both budget and staff. However, several companies emphasized how important it is to not only have staff but have the right staff on the ground doing audience engagement work. Despite
staffing being a challenge, it was identified as being absolutely crucial to building and maintaining an audience engagement practice.

City Lights Theater Company hosts a party on stage after every performance. They play music. The actors stay in costume. The audience can join the party, or not. Those who do join often ask questions about the play. “We try to have a staff person at the parties,” says Mallette. “We can’t always have a staff member there because our staff is small, but we have great relationships with the artists so I ask them to host. I make sure the actors who work with us understand our mission. The mission is painted in the lobby. It’s on the first page of the actor contracts. If the actors are the ones who are the face of City Lights at those parties then they need to know how to talk about us.”

Amanda Folena, artistic director at San Francisco’s Broadway by the Bay at the time the interview was conducted, says, “Put more money into people and less into stuff. I make sure that when it comes to budget cuts, we don’t cut the marketing. It’s always the first thing to go. If I put money into the people we can find creative solutions.”

“We created a new position three and a half years ago, a director of community investment, to really help facilitate these cross-sector partnerships,” says Zak Berkman, producing director People’s Light. “The work is hugely labor intensive. It requires a very stable organization to be able to sustain the kind of long-term digging in the trenches that is required. Relationships can only occur when people have been at the organization for a long period of time.” Berkman also acknowledges that they are constantly questioning whether it’s better to have audience engagement techniques that are production-driven rather than organizationally, or brand, driven.

Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company in Washington, DC takes a production-driven,
show-by-show, approach to their “connectivity” work. When the connectivity department was started in 2010, it was a one-person department. Since then the department has grown to two people but is about to go back down to a size of one as the second staff position is grant-funded. “To some extent whenever there is turnover, connectivity is still only particular to who is here, who the department’s director is, and what their values are,” says Jackson, “No matter what, there’s a process of education that has to happen consistently. Otherwise connectivity is a weird thing off to the side.”

While A.R.T. also has a one-person engagement team, that staff person and the engagement budget are part of the marketing department. Brendan Shea, who heads the company’s audience engagement work as their Education and Community Programs Associate, says:

I think this is a really good model that theatres could learn from. Our missions are not totally different. This structure has really kept our departments on mission by having to really think about, as part of the marketing department, executing education and community programs. For marketing, they have had to shift their thinking from a transaction-focus to an audience development and engagement focus. It’s also really allowed me in my department to leverage the resources of the marketing department, and get the word out about our programs. I’m in the same office with them, we have weekly meetings with the whole team, and we have separate weekly meetings with education squad, and I have a weekly meeting with Anna, the marketing director, so we always know what each other is doing. We’re not siloed at all in terms of communicating our work on-stage vs. off-stage.
The 52nd Street Project also has one staff person dedicated to audience outreach, but due to their unique model the position is nestled in the development department—the manager of individual giving. The creation of this position came directly from what the company learned from participating in the Intrinsic Impact Study and in large part the company’s audience engagement work is focused around their membership program. Another part of the staffing plan that came into focus after the Study is the realization that additional help would be needed in marketing and social outreach, either as a half-time position in the next year or a full-time position in the next three years.

People’s Light made some big organizational changes to bring in their director of community investment—a position which works across marketing, artistic, development, and patron services. Berkman explains:

We restructured marketing and brought it more in-house. We used to outsource graphic design. We had a marketing director and an assistant. Now we have a director, someone who’s focus is all on graphics and email and digital, another who’s more of an associate to the marketing person, and a group sales person. We brought on an institutional writer who does press releases and web writing so the language is more consistent. By bringing art and graphics in-house we’ve been able to be more responsive. We have someone who can take photos and post them quickly. This speed isn’t something we had before.

Berkman also says People’s Light is in the midst of researching and setting up a whole new department of patron and guest services that will function similarly to concierge services:
We’re looking at hospitality practices across all types of organizations and companies. We’re going to restructure our box office and front-of-house. The idea we have is to have more full-time people with benefits and require them to be more skilled and be docents of the organization. It’s going to be over a period of time so it’ll be a slow transition. How we’ll pay for it will be in how we shift the existing staff, less part-time and more full-time. We have telemarketing staff, we have a box office staff—where the box office is all intake and in-calling and telemarketing is all outgoing. Part of this is figuring out how to fuse the two jobs—which often require different skills, traits, interests and characteristics—to find a way to get these two to work together.

In addition to their nonprofit theatre, People’s Light has a for-profit business which is their farmhouse catering. Part of their staffing change will require figuring out how to merge the for-profit and nonprofit operations together to make them both stronger. How can the wait staff get in to see a dress rehearsal so they can talk to everyone they’re serving about the plays, wonders Berkman:

When people come to a wedding we want to give all guests a voucher for a free ticket. The box office has to be able to be selling both entities and helping to create appetite. They’re also selling our classes and the other activities that happen on the campus. We just created a new position, the director of patron services (house management and box office report to this person). We’ve started quarterly meetings with the whole staff at the Farmhouse with the house management and box office staff. We’re trying to create a team atmosphere between them and provide learning sharing and
information between them. It's tricky because they are different cultures. The idea is that long-term relationships are at the center of the organization.

At Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company the connectivity director gives a presentation at first read alongside the director and designers for the show. She presents her “audience design” concept and explains the various activities that will happen around the production. In addition to the artistic team, first read attendees include donors, supporters, and friends of Woolly. Having all these people in the room creates a “cross-pollination,” as Jackson puts it:

One donor might have contacts in the areas I've outlined, or with other people or places we want to engage with. People in that room help me make connections. Another thing we’re going to do is restart our full-staff meetings about connectivity. This is something that happened in the early stages of the department, but the new structure will be more of an opportunity for the full staff to hear from the artistic department and for everyone in the building to understand what's up with the play and where we’re going with programming.

Looking at the cost of audience engagement work, American Shakespeare Company is doing a full cost/benefit analysis. “Like all theatres we have more programming than our staff can support,” says managing director Amy Wratchford, “so we need to shift so we can maximize that with the staff we have.”

**ON WEBSITES AND WEB CONTENT**

One very common response organizations received from audiences as a result of the Intrinsic Impact Study was that extremely high percentages of audiences claim to
have reviewed information on the organization’s website prior to attending a production. As such, many organizations interviewed began to look at their sites through a new lens. How easy is it to find information about how to get to the theatre? What do to beforehand? If theatres are providing audiences with more dramaturgical context before they see the show, how easy is it to find that information? Some organizations worked to create clearer channels for displaying and distributing the information in hopes it would help the audience find what’s already out there more easily. Other organizations really beefed up the content they were sharing. Much of this content was displayed on their websites but in some cases it was pushed out through social media and video in more robust and strategic ways than before.

“It was very interesting to hear respondents say the kind of things we wish we did, and then list things that we already do,” says Neil Racioppo, director of marketing at Arena Stage in Washington, DC, “…an email before the show, a video, an interview with the cast or director. On the one hand it’s great they want to receive the info we’re creating and they want to receive it. We just need to get it to them differently.”

“There were lots of things people were asking in the open forum part of the Study that were things we’re already providing; they just didn’t know where to look. That was really the major shift in our actions,” says Amy Wretchford, managing director at American Shakespeare Center located in Staunton, VA, about 160 miles southwest of Washington, DC. “We had to figure out how to get [the content] to them differently.”

“One of the things we learned from Intrinsic Impact Phase III was, ‘oh my gosh, do people look at our website!’ It was an alarming number,” says Mallette from City Lights Theater Company. “We redesigned our website based on that feedback. We needed it
to be easier to negotiate with a more tech-savvy world, have a more accessible look, more white background than black, make it mobile friendly, which it wasn’t before. We needed it to be easier to access the pages for our different programs. We just tried to make it friendlier.”

Lauren Chavez, managing director at We Players in San Francisco, CA had a similar takeaway:

One of the questions on our survey was ‘how did you prepare’? What we realized is that a lot of people read the email we send them about the performance and that people go to our website. We’ve made little videos to help people prepare. We’ve written plot summaries. We did those before Intrinsic Impact, but we learned two-thirds of the audience explored our website prior to attending so what we did was add more blog material about the process and the play. That’s what we did this in response. Now we’re rebuilding our website so it’s easier to explore and learn about the project. It’s really important for us to make it easy to search. We want people to be able to just type in the show name and we want to make sure everything that’s put up is tagged appropriately.

People’s Light in Pennsylvania has also beefed-up their web content and created a friendlier navigation in hopes that it would be easier for web visitors to access the content they were creating. Berkman says:

We retargeted our email, are redoing the website, and launched a subscribers’ insight email that is meant to provide subscribers with a greater window access into what’s happening here and with our people, give them
productions with design presentations. We’re trying to beef up the website to give more background on plays or artists. We’ve expanded the Explore page on our site and are using social media for audience engagement.

Much of the content that interviewees began adding to their website was dramaturgical in nature. Yeghiazarian from Golden Thread, says, “For the show we’re doing now (The Most Dangerous Highway in the World), which is inspired by two articles in The New York Times, we began circulating those articles on social media three months ago. We began posting news stories about Afghani organizations that work in the Bay Area. There’s engagement online with those materials. We did some blog posts about this show too.”

Suzanne Appel, who was the managing director at San Francisco’s Cutting Ball Theater Company at the time of her interview for this paper, also noted the company’s commitment to posting more dramaturgical information about the shows on their website:

We’ve vastly increased the amount of dramaturgical information that’s on our website. It includes all of the dramaturgy notes, playwright’s notes, a note from Rob (our artistic director), and anything that’s relevant about the production—pictures of costumes, a model of the set, a video from rehearsal, links to other related information, our video trailer. We put the content on the individual show’s sites, and put it on Facebook and Twitter as well. That’s the kind of content we’re sharing. It’s deepening-engagement content. We started a blog so we’d have more opportunities to share that info too. We’re letting people in earlier on so they can see what we’re doing with the hope
that'll mean that they will likely get more out of it later.

ON SOCIAL MEDIA AND VIDEO

Many organizations, once they had created more robust content for their websites, looked towards distribution channels as well. How could they get this information out to their potential, and existing, audiences? Two of the tools that were commonly used were social media and video.

Zak Berkman of People’s Light says they have a monthly staff meeting dedicated to social media:

The biggest thing is the thirst for content. You’ve gotta feed the beast.

Marketing said, we need the content. We can’t make it all up. That’s why it became cross-departmental (marketing, development, production, artistic), so they can bring info and content. What we talk about in the meeting is the schedule for the month: productions, events. We all weigh in on providing content. All departments want a presence. Doing this helps us figure out how to best do that. Connected to this, we have a meeting at the first rehearsal. We call it a producers’ meeting. The stage manager and director meet with marketing, development, and community investment staff to talk about what kind of access there is to artists in the rehearsal room and what they can provide. This includes a whole social media element because marketing is asking, ‘can we give people cell phones to take pictures, can we come in to film, can we get someone to take over Twitter for a few days.’ We do a lot of those things, figuring out access. We get artistic on board because then the
actors are more likely to get on board.

At Bristol Riverside, a subscriber benefit was that subscribers could come an hour before the performance and sit in the house and listen to a member of the staff talk about the show—about the design, directorial, or acting choices. They’d gain insight into the design of the show they were about to see. Audiences would be told to look out for this or that while watching the show. Only about four to six people attended these events nightly. Soon the staff realized there was much more that could be done with video so they started putting this content in video. Once that was done, they realized the reach could be much further than to just subscribers. The video now lives on the website and on YouTube, is sent in an e-blast, and played in the lobby. Some bits are posted on Facebook. The subscriber events don’t exist in that old form anymore. Subscribers are still invited to come early and can watch the video in the lobby. But the video offers a lot more than a person could reading a script. The Bristol Riverside staff says the audience just missed that experience because it was person-to-person.

ON EMAILS

The theme of providing content to help audiences prepare for the show continues when we look at emails. Interviewees claimed to be using email in new ways since the Study, particularly at how to segment content to more specific audiences than they can with their websites. They’re using to take a deeper look into what’s working and what isn’t. Orlando Shakespeare Theater is seeing great open-rates since they’ve started doing targeted email blasts. Melissa Braillard, director of marketing communications at Orlando Shakespeare Theater says:
I don’t know if it’s a direct correlation [to Intrinsic Impact], but I do more targeted email blasts now. Five years ago we’d send an email to everyone, all 24,000 of them, and we’d send to them and say, come see *West Side Story*. Now we’ll do one when the show goes on sale, then you’ll only hear from us if you’ve seen a musical or similar show, and haven’t purchased a ticket. I’m seeing much greater success—a much higher open rate, about a 45% open rate now. I’m very pleased and I can see there’s a spike in ticket sales.

Similar to what they’ve done with websites, several interviewees noted that their organizations are adding more content to their emails since participating in the Intrinsic Impact Study. “We started using MailChimp right around the time we got our Intrinsic Impact results,” says Tina Brock, co-founding producing artistic director of The Idiopathic Ridiculopathy Consortium (a company based in Philadelphia, PA that produces work by absurdist writers with an annual operating budget of just over $100,000). “I do a monthly, not a ‘newsletter’ but a ‘communication with our audience.’” She continues:

If we’re between shows it’s about starting to front-load about what’s coming down the line to get [audiences] excited about what’s happening. Some of the info is about the design, some is philosophical, some is about the author. I want to start to get them ready about how this production is going to be different and continue to put things in there about Ionesco, for example—who he was, why he’s important. We have a really high open-rate for these emails. I take a lot of time with them, probably a week and half in total, some
hours each day. It opens doors. It’s really the only thing we do. It’s the most
efficient. I see it as an artistic project. It’s visual. I get feedback a lot of people
who say the look forward to it, it really prepared them.

Appel from Cutting Ball says they started a new type of email to give audiences
channels through which to experience the play called a “three insights” email. For
everyone who’s a ticket buyer, the day before the show they get a reminder that they
have a ticket, things like ‘the theatre is warm.’ The email tells them where to find
parking, and it gives them three things to look for when they’re watching the show.

Rayna Adams, marketing director at Bristol Riverside Theatre also mentioned a
pre-show email the company started after participating in the Intrinsic Impact study. “We
started an e-blast that goes out before the performance that gives them directions,
insider tips on things to know before coming. We put a video in the second email, a
thank you email, where people could click, ‘if you want to know more go here to the
video.’”

Amy Wratchford, managing director at American Shakespeare Company,
mentioned a similar strategy her company began after the study, “We started to send
pre-show emails with links to the director notes, staging conditions—it gave people info
on what to expect. The open rate and click-through rate were really good. I don’t have
proof it actually sold tickets, but we had great click-through rates.”

American Shakespeare Company isn’t the only organization that admitted to
keeping an extremely close eye on email data. Whereas most of the companies we
spoke with are expanding the amount of content they are putting in their emails—
perhaps because of the acquisition of a new technology or a refined way of looking at
audience segments—Arena Stage, which has done robust email marketing for years, is taking a different approach.

“We’ve actually just started talking about reducing the amount of content we put in our emails because we feel like our emails are overwhelmingly filled with copy,” says Neal Racioppo, director of marketing. We’re thinking—is there more we can do with images? Is there a way to get people to click out of the mail to learn more?”

ON PROGRAMS

The theme of adding more content to websites, social media, and video doesn’t stop in the digital space. Several organizations mentioned that they’ve added content to their physical space as well, starting with programs. Interviewees from Broadway by the Bay, the 52nd Street Project, Bay Area Children’s Theatre, and Orlando Shakespeare Theater all spoke about how they added content to their programs and began to see the value and potential of that physical piece in a new way.

“What we learned from Intrinsic Impact is changing the way we’re doing our program,” says Amanda Folena from Broadway by the Bay. “There’s more dramaturgy content. For In the Heights we were able to do a meet-the-cast, history, a special section about Washington Heights. There were interviews with the director about the piece. They really get into the meat of the piece.”

Of course, adding content to a program can increase the cost of a physical piece that’s already a high-budget item for most theatres. Braillard at Orlando Shakespeare Theater says printing programs is a huge expense for the organization—one that costs upwards of $23,000 per production:
We had discussed doing away with them entirely, going green, putting them online. We’ve done some of those things and found ways to offset the cost but we’ve kept them. We’ve gotten rid of the recycling bins. (We used to have ushers stand outside the theatre doors and collect the programs.) Now we try to order enough to have everyone take them home with them. When we can we’ve added more information that is background-related, knowing that not everyone gets there 30 minutes before the show and sits and reads it, but that they can do that when they get home, so there’s added value to the program. As an extension we’ve put it on the website so people can find it and read it before they arrive.

Orlando Shakespeare Theater isn’t the only company who adjusted their strategy based on the number of people who take programs home with them after the show. At the 52nd Street Project they learned from intrinsic impact data that more people took the programs home with them than they expected. John Sheehy, director of development and marketing for the Project says:

We found people held onto and cherished our programs. The number of people who referred to the programs was astronomical. We thought, maybe we should put more thought into that. We decided to make the graphics and images all in color and it didn’t cost us extra because we printed them in house, so things like that. Those little engagement points for us were part of what came out of the experience with the Intrinsic Impact Study.

Min Kahng, marketing manager and casting director at Bay Area Children’s Theatre is in a similar position. Thirty percent of their survey respondents said they will,
or have, gone home and read the program more thoroughly. He realized the programs were a connecting point for their audiences:

It was a way to get our audiences who aren’t necessarily theatre folk, to give them the language in the playbill itself. One of the things I did for James and the Giant Peach is, I added a snippet of a blog post (we have nine to eleven-year-old bloggers). We usually just put the blogs online but for this playbill I put part of it in the playbill. She wrote about the adaptation of a book into a musical. And when people go home they start to see that kids can start to think about what it means to do an adaptation, to talk to their kids about that. It’s a way to use the playbill to educate and challenge our audiences to learn more about the theatre—not just the kids but the parents as well. Also, our ushers are always parent/child teams. Most of the time when you come to a Bay Area Children’s Theatre show, the person who hands you your program is probably six. It’s about helping the audience who are six feel more welcome. Going to the theatre when you are five or six for the first time it’s intimidating, it’s a new environment. You don’t know how to process the whole thing. The more we can do to make that child feel like this is their world then the better off we are.

ON LOBBIES

When we asked interviewees if they were doing anything in their lobbies to engage audiences, the responses were tremendous. We received several responses, most of which can be categorized into two common themes: one, to make the space more
welcoming and, two, to use the lobby as another space in which to prepare the audience for the show they were about to see.

Torange Yeghiazarian from Golden Thread says the company had received feedback from audiences who participated in Intrinsic Impact that they feel invited to have a conversation in Golden Thread’s space—more so than they do in other spaces. Yeghiazarian says:

We’re at the theatre every night, in the lobby, available to audiences. We did that before Intrinsic Impact. The next step we took was, we actually became intentional about it. We said, let’s spark conversation. We put more thought into the information we post in the lobby acknowledging the way our audience is contributing to our work and in scheduling front-of-house we always make sure we have someone representing Golden Thread in the lobby—in addition to ushers and box office. We have our managing director or marketing director, one of us is always in the lobby. We stand near our information and are always looking to engage audiences in conversations. We have conversations with our board to let us know when they are attending and when they’re bringing groups, if they’re groups with specific intersects, so we can be prepared for those conversations.

Brock at The Idiopathic Ridiculopathy Consortium also works in the lobby every night—not only to welcome patrons but to use the information she gathers from that experience as a resource. She says:
I work the box office. I’m in the lobby every night, even if I’m in the show. I find a way to do it because it’s where you get the best information. Other artistic directors say, ‘it’s not cool for you to be in the lobby, when are you going to go back[stage]?’ I don’t think I’ll ever stop because I’m getting such great information. If I’m in the show and I have to get ready, I have someone else do it. But our audience loves it, to see us. That’s how I get the data. We don’t survey people. We think maybe we should after they buy tickets. I haven’t seen anyone irritated that I’m staying there at the box office. I have a rapport; they tell me what they really think. I think it’s another reason they give more money, too—it’s an all-hands-on-deck approach. It’s what it means to be a small theatre company today. I literally write this stuff down and I take it back to staff meetings.

California Shakespeare Theater has long been a destination for theatre lovers in the Bay Area. Their performance space, the Bruns, an outdoor amphitheatre, is located in the East Bay, on a hill in Orinda, CA, surrounded by eucalyptus groves. The grounds open two hours before every performance and people bring their picnics, sit at any one of the many picnic tables, and many audience members enjoy the pre-show “Grove Talk” which takes places in a dedicated picnic area before every performance. Technically there is no physical lobby space as their whole outdoor campus acts as a “lobby.”

Rebecca Novick, who was the company’s associate artistic director at the time of her interview for this paper, says of the Bruns:

It’s a space people interact with very differently than an indoor space
where people come maybe 20 minutes ahead of time, maybe get some wine, get their program, and sit down. People are really spending time with us. What can we be doing during that time that enhances that time and enhances their relationship with coming up there. I tried to enhance it with things that were specific to the show. We found we did a lot that didn't have impact. It felt like decorating around the edges. When they come to the Bruns, people want to be together, with the party they came with. My new motto for 2013 was ‘respect the picnic.’ People come early so they have time to talk to the friends they came with.

“The thing that we discovered is that although a fair amount of audiences come to the Bruns with their own plan for the evening—they have their routines, they come to the talks,” recalls Janet Magleby, California Shakespeare Theater’s director of marketing and communications, “A larger than expected percentage of people didn’t take advantage of those things. We recognized, beginning with Intrinsic Impact and continuing beyond, that the new people had no idea what they were supposed to do. As a newcomer, how do you fit yourself into that kind of a situation?”

Novick recalls a conversation with a new board member she had when she was at California Shakespeare Theater:

He had just joined the board and came to the Bruns with some friends to see a show. All the new board members come and meet with the staff when they join. He met with me and Janet. We asked what it felt like going to the Bruns for the first time and he said it felt a little like going to a party he didn’t know the rules to. And this is a white-guy banker, it’s not the percentage we felt
might be uncomfortable coming to the Bruns. His comment became a rallying point about a lot of the work we did, about making it more transparent. We thought we were a little ‘Country Club’ but maybe it’s a little more ‘Secret Lodge.’ It’s a very retreat-like experience. It’s very different. We changed the signage last year. All the signage changed to be much more instructional; this is where the bathrooms are, drinking foundations that way, this is the Grove Talk, this is the performance. There’s a sign halfway up the walk up the hill that says “almost there,” which is right when on the hill we see people having a face of despair. We created a welcome center. So many people would show up at the center and say, ‘I’m here, it’s my first time, they told me to come here.’

The Cal Shakes Welcome Center is open every night and staffed with a dedicated person whose responsibility is to act like a concierge – to welcome people to the theatre, acquaint them with where things could be found, let them know what was available to them, and answer any questions audiences might have.

However, Cal Shakes didn’t give up on engagement activities at the Bruns entirely. They have a chalkboard that asks audiences to respond to a question related to the show. They do little activities from time to time as well, but nothing prescribed. “Some shows just lend themselves to more activities—shows with deep issues or darker themes. We didn’t think each show should have the same template. It would feel forced,” says Novick. She continues:

[With] the special event, it is the way to go. For these, the closer you can tie it to the show the more they make sense to people. For A Midsummer
Night’s Dream we had a day we had a “Find Your Inner Fairy” dance party. The theme was very supported by how much that show messed with gender and sexuality, so we had surprise pop-up dance all over the grounds before the show. It used people that were in the show and people who were not. That night after the show we had a set of drag performances on stage and at least half the audience stayed. For 20 minutes they sat and watched some of San Francisco’s most exciting drag performers in the area. After the show we had the dance party on the plaza. There were tutus, glitter. It was participatory, equalizing. It brought out the inner-monkey in our normal audiences. People came dressed as fairies, came in costume, every gay member of our staff came, one of the gay members of our board came. There was a way it surfaced the queerness in our company. We had the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence come. It was a lot. I don’t think we could have done it every night but it was a huge success.

American Repertory Theater in Cambridge, MA also took a hospitality approach to their lobby experience and focused their engagement activities. Shea notes that the company used to have five or six different ways audiences could engage in the lobby space, and some of those engagement paths had a dead-end. He elaborates:

There were too many to choose from. It overwhelmed the community. Instead, we focused on really good hospitality when it comes to each event. There’s a member of my staff that’s there. It can be teaching artist or someone from front-of-house. It’s very important to welcome audiences.
We want to create a pipeline for who comes to the theatre. We don’t tell them to come back and buy a ticket. We welcome them. Now, when we do an activity in the lobby we make sure it’s really, strategically connected to the show.

Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company uses their lobby as a space for their connectivity events—not just for conversations but for lobby designs or community gathering places around the show. Connectivity director Kristen Jackson says their lobby experiences are continuing down a path that had already been established and in general are getting a larger footprint, which can be a challenge when it comes to installation. The content of the lobby experiences changes show-by-show, just like the rest of the company’s connectivity work:

In terms of content we’re still mostly trying to focus on getting audience members to connect their own experience to the play and what they’re about to see, and prime their intelligence for the show to come. Also, we try to foster those social connections—between the person you came with and with random audience members whenever possible. The lobby has looked completely different from show to show. Some have been digital and analog; some have been only analog.

Down the road in DC, Arena Stage is exploring a mix of digital and analog activities in their lobby as well. “We have interactive displays in the lobby that we didn’t have before, but we had those in the works before the study,” says Neal Racioppo, director of marketing. “It’s appealing to young people, but it is for old people too. We do two to three things per show (anything from create a picture from this puzzle, or learn
more about the characters in this play). For Sweat we reproduced a piece in The New York Times that Lynne Nottage did and we recreated it.”

Braillard at Orlando Shakespeare Theater says they are always looking for ways to extend the theatre beyond the theatre walls:

For It’s a Wonderful Life and Nicholas Nickleby we had actors in the lobby before the show. We started the experience early. While we’re not able to do it for every show, we are looking for that opportunity in many of our shows. With our kids shows especially I’m looking for ways to do cut-outs in the lobbies for photos. We do autographs after the shows. I’ll bring the cast out to meet the kids prior to the performance. This year we did Elephant and Piggie Are in a Play and it was running during Shakespeare’s birthday. We did a pre-show activity where Piggy sang happy birthday to Shakespeare and gave away ice cream.

Bay Area Children’s Theatre had a face painter in the lobby for their production of Ladybug Girl and Bumble Bee Boy. “It was very successful,” recalls executive director Nina Meehan, “The kids were thrilled. Parents are thrilled when the child is engaged because they feel like they are bringing their child to a place where they are experiencing something memorable.”

“For James and the Giant Peach we had a photo booth,” Meehan continues, “We took one of the projections and turned it into a backdrop—the image is something that they see in the show. The parents can take a photo of their child in front of it and we encourage them to put it on Instagram.”

In addition to creating experiences in lobbies, many companies use their lobbies
as another place—in addition to websites and emails—to display dramaturgical information. Cutting Ball Theater Company has expanded the “three insights” tactic they applied to their emails to the lobby as well. Appell notes that in the lobby they can reach more than just ticket buyers:

We want everyone to walk in with information. The idea is to keep these insights really short. If we do it in the lobby instead of part of the curtain speech it creates a different sense of attention, so that’s deliberate. We’re separating it from the ‘turn off your phone’ information which for many people becomes like the airline stewards’ speech, which can become ignored. Doing it in the lobby creates a different sense of warmth and connection with your audiences.

At Golden Thread in San Francisco putting dramaturgical information in the lobby isn’t anything new, but they are being more intentional about what content goes up and making sure the whole staff is familiar with what’s displayed. Yeghiazarian explains:

With ReOrient (a festival we produce every two years), last year we developed a historic timeline banner that was in the lobby. It was an audience engagement tool in the sense it had a number of significant historic events not on the banner, and there were post-its and a sign that said ‘add your own historic invent.’ People would write on the post-it and hang it. Some were events and some were questions. We added something like gaining the right to vote, but someone added that women didn’t get the right until 20 years later. We left some events out, five significant ones, to provoke reactions. By the end of ReOrient’s four week
run that banner was packed with post-its.

At Orlando Shakespeare Theater they’ve changed the messaging in the lobby from being solely about promoting the shows to content that explains more about everything the company does—education, camps, fundraising, its history (like the fact Patrick Stewart's performed there). Similar to Golden Thread, Orlando Shakespeare Theater also has a timeline in their lobby:

We started the timeline in 2008 and updated it in 2012 for our 25th anniversary. It’s a static wall with some digital screens that tracks our history from conception in 1989 to the current season. You can see when we did what show and our milestones. In addition to that, we’re putting up a digital display that will show not just what’s currently playing but will focus on our branding. They’ll be used to educate audiences about all of our programs.

Dallas Theatre Center has also developed content for a wall in their lobby where people can share their thoughts on a production. It’s up for every show and the idea came out of the conversations they were having around intrinsic impact.

When Orlando Shakespeare Theater does show-specific lobby displays they think of the content as an extension of the program. “[The content is] dramaturgical in nature. There’s background info on the playwright, director, themes, history of the piece. There's trivia. It's different for every show. We’re more involved with the lobby display than we were before the Study. We want to give people what will make them successful going into the shows.”

Rayna Adams at Bristol Riverside says they learned their audience wants to know
more about the shows the theatre’s producing or the shows the audience is going to see. “We now send out a video in advance. We put posters in the lobby. The content of the lobby posters can vary depending on the show. If it’s based on a real person the content could be a biography about the person, a timeline of their life. If the play is based in the 1940s it might be about things that were happening at the time. If it’s a farce, we might explain what a farce is.”

It’s clear that since the time the Intrinsic Impact Study began, the participants we spoke with have shifted their thinking to view lobbies as a place of preparation and where hospitality is key to making audiences feel welcome and included.

ON PRE- AND POST-SHOW CONVERSATIONS

Some Study participants we spoke with have not only shifted their thinking in how to use lobbies, emails, websites, and social media as avenues for content, but have thought about structuring their post-show, and even pre-show conversations, differently as well.

The Idiopathic Ridiculopathy Consortium does talk-backs after their shows but have been playing with the format. The company started an education and outreach committee because so many students attend their shows—mostly from Penn and Temple Universities—but it should be noted that the do not do student matinees. The students attend the same performances as the general public. Brock says:

Most of the students come from philosophy, English lit, urban studies. It’s not the traditional theatre students. We’re trying to expand what that looks like.

For Gogol we had Russian Studies students in there. We had two professors
who had seen the play. They were able to discuss the difference between our version and the one they taught. That’s the kind of thing our audience really, really likes. The talk-back on the ancillary topic didn’t work for us. Our people want to know about what the set is doing, why the abstraction in the costume. They’re interested in the writers of the day. I try to work with really good people [designers, directors] but given how small we are, we play proportionally. I think it’s important that the design elements be strong and I do pay [the designers], but I don’t have them at my disposal to have them participate in all the talk-backs. It’s easier for the big companies to do that. For me, once that show’s up and running, the chances of getting the designers in is slim. But what happens is, I speak to the audiences as the director. I think in general peoples’ interest in talk-backs is waning. I’m not sure for us they’re working. That’s why we’re finding another way—script-in-hand and conversation. And beer helps. It does.

At Bay Area Children’s Theatre the age of the student attendee is lower than that at Idiopathic Ridiculopathy Consortium, and the work vastly different. However, Bay Area Children’s Theatre also helps students contextualize the work and learn the language of the theatre. Unlike Idiopathic Ridiculopathy Consortium, Bay Area Children’s Theatre does have student matinees. Meehan says:

When I introduce the matinees I give [the students] a question, something to think about the show as they watch it. ‘As you watch the show today I want you to think about the differences between a play and a book, and why the playwright made the decisions they did.’ We’re trying to give them the critical
thinking it takes to be a good theatregoer from day one. Our goal is that by
the time they become an adult they know how to ask those questions and
they become a critical and engaged audience member.

At Orlando Shakespeare Theater they rejiggered the format of their pre-show
conversation entirely. They realized the format wasn’t achieving their goals so they
found new avenues through which to deliver the information. Mason explains:

Anecdotally, prior to 2010–11, opening night of each show was about half-
full. We have 325 seats. One hundred fifty attendees—subscribers and single
ticket buyers—was common. Now we’ve added a pre-show dinner,
appetizers set up buffet-style (we have a food partner for every show that’s
always a local business), then we move into a pre-show conversation. The
conversation may include members of the design team, or some trivia if it
allows—something fun and light that gives people who attend a glimpse of
something they wouldn’t know if they didn’t attend this event. Now the
opening nights are sold out. I used to see 25 people in the pre-show chat.
Now I see 125 people. Our biggest success is that opening night is an event.
Most of the shows we do don’t have a pre-show chat. We do one every
Sunday out of every signature series. The third Sunday in the run we do a
post-show. When we do Shakespeare (which is not not as often as you’d
think) we do a prologue series. An actor talks about the show’s themes or
they do trivia. We had talked about not doing them. The way we do them isn’t
in-depth enough for some patrons. Our setup isn’t conducive to that (it takes
place in the theatre before the show and every five minutes the actor who’s
hosting has to invite people in and get them up to speed). As we approach the Shakespeare people will always ask, are you doing them? We’ve not seen an increase in attendance but if we took them away we’d need to find a better way to do them. People do put value in them.

At People’s Light they also do a pre-show discussion, called ‘Scoop.’ They have revised the format of that event since participating in Intrinsic Impact. ‘Scoop’ is hosted by a dramaturg and an artist, and their conversation is all about opening windows into the process—the context, history, and gossip about the shows. They’ve also revised the formats for several of their other audience engagement events. Berkman explains:

We continued with Thursday post-show discussions, but we’ve highlighted them more. We did stand-alone panel discussions that connected to the show thematically. We had a whole community summer brochure that highlighted the reading and new play projects connected to audience development. The theatre has always had a strong community relationship—especially with youth. It was already a dynamic thing. The study didn’t trigger it, it just coincided with it.

“The surveys validated that the practices were important and showed us ways we could be more effective,” says Yeghiazarian from Golden Thread. For Golden Thread, it’s important to create a space for open dialogue around the shows they produce for all cultures the shows represent. She elaborates:

Everyone talks about diversity and inclusion. It means different things to different people; it means something different to us. It’s unpacking what it means to us in practice. We’re being even more intentional about creating the
space for people to express themselves openly, people of different backgrounds. There’s historic animosity in the culture. That happens to us all the time, like having an American vet in the room with an Iraqi. Because we have a broad and inclusive definition of the Middle East, we actively invite different people to our theatre. Then our theatre becomes an amazing opportunity for conversation and we’re even more active and intentional about those conversations.

**ON ACTIVITIES INSIDE THE THEATRE WALLS**

In addition to pre- and post-show conversations and lobby experiences, several companies we spoke with produce other audience engagement events that take place within the walls of their building. Examples include blogger nights, book groups, social-group outings, and more.

Lisa Mallette at City Lights Theater Company in San Jose says for them, no matter the activity or the performance, the ideas is to “keep it fun” and “focus on the energy surrounding the story.” She explains, “Even if the story makes you cry, the experience still has to be fun. You don’t have to dress up to come here. You can bring your drink in. We have donated seats that have cup holders. It’s casual. It helps young people who have an old-fashioned idea of what theatre is. So we’ve already broken that down, from a long time ago, so people feel comfortable here.”

Among the many pre- and post-show activities that Bristol Riverside Theatre Company does is “Thirsty Thursday,” which is new since their participation in the Intrinsic Impact Study. “We definitely have seen an increase in more and more people
coming. We were doing something before during Intrinsic Impact called a 'Singles Night' and that never worked so we switched it.”

Bay Area Children’s Theatre started a student blogger night that has grown in popularity. The bloggers get a backstage tour, a name badge, free tickets to the show, and other exclusive experiences. “These individuals get a different experience and they’re encouraged to think about theatre differently,” says Berkman. This year, because of the popularity of the program, they started an application process.

Bay Area Children’s Theatre has another tactic to make attendees feel welcome in their space, one that isn’t tied directly to a lobby experience or one particular activity. “The children who are in our classes get a lanyard,” says Berkman, “and if they come to see the show and bring their lanyard they get a treat. It gives them ownership. It makes them feel comfortable. Also, all of the children get a poster and the actors sign it after the show. The kids get to take that home as a souvenir. We get calls now, ‘our child has aged-out but our entire playroom is wallpapered with posters from your shows.’ They put the poster up, they talk about it, they see it, they read the book. It has great impact.”

City Lights Theater Company does something similar. Mallette says:

We give a gift to every audience member for every performance. It’s a different gift for each show. We call it a ‘small gesture of hospitality.’ The gift is connected to the theme of the story. For Truce, one thing those soldiers shared is chocolates so we had chocolates made and everyone gets one. It has our logo on it. For Art we gave people mini watercolor palettes. But it’s not a gift we found at Smart and Final, it has to do with the story. What we’re doing is trying to expand their connection to the story we’re telling. It started
with *in the next room or the vibrator play*. The show has some sensitive issues that are very relevant: intimacy, respect, being comfortable with your loved ones. What we did to encourage people to talk about it, we had five different little cards made. On the front was an image of the show, with [the characters] embracing with the snow falling. On the back, I did research and found five lesser-known erogenous zones. We encouraged people to collect all five and try them with their loved ones. ‘Have you ever tried to tickle the back of your knee,’ things like that. It can break the ice. We acknowledged that people do have these issues and they can take what they learned from the play with them when they go home.

Dallas Theatre Center started a book group where they would read books tied to performances. “Last year in our group, twenty to thirty percent hadn’t been to theatre in a few years. Fifteen percent were disengaged; ten percent were brand new,” says Hull. “The intellectual aspect of being part of the book club enticed them back. Twenty-five percent were single ticket buyers. Fifty percent were loyalists. We’re thinking about people in different ways. We have to be able to think about their history with us.”

Brendan Shea at A.R.T. says their engagement activities are very tied to mission. They believe that if someone doesn’t buy a ticket to a show but comes to one of their events, that person has a high-probability of becoming a ticket-buyer and of becoming an evangelist for the brand. “The events are not designed to convert you into making a transaction,” he says, “but it’s another way of looking at a topic, theme, or issue that’s important to the theatregoer community.”

At Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company, the audience engagement programming
varies show-by-show. Jackson explains:

We’ve done everything from post-show panel discussions, to more in-depth sessions, yoga, and meditation sessions. We’ve done trivia. We’ve done spoken-word events, we’ve done performance art, movement workshops, creative response workshops. What I try to do is find as many different ways into the experience as I can. While I definitely do a fair share of post-show conversations with experts in whatever area it is, whatever we think pertinent conversations are, I’m always looking for other ways into the material, and to access the material, and to introduce new audience into the show.

“I’m very proud of what we’re doing around An Octaroon,” Jackson continues:

There’s an engagement opportunity around every performance. We have three tracks of activities: community conversations led by skilled facilitators, opportunities for post-show reflections for audiences to speak to what is resonating, what is challenging. It’s audience-focused. We have another track we’re calling the 'Un-Lecture' series. They dig into big ideas, historical concepts, major themes, things where it’s nice to have a scholar or expert provide, or teach, additional context. The third track are 'Creative Happenings'—these are creative responses that riff on the play, are inspired by the play, inspired by the themes of the play. For the lobby, we have turned it into a public art project. We had one of our partners (Sheldon Scott, a local visual and performance artist), help us curate a lobby experience that riffs on, ‘how does the past help inform the present.’ It’s called 'Radical Re-Imaginings: Our Racialized, Past, Present, and Futures.'
ON ACTIVITIES OUTSIDE THE THEATRE WALLS

Several companies have expanded their engagement programming in such a way that it takes place outside the theatre walls. Oftentimes these off-site programs are done in partnership with organizations where community partners or advocates work (an intentional way way to go to where the people are) but sometimes it’s just for fun, like what is done in Philadelphia by The Idiopathic Ridiculopathy Consortium. “We’ll do a thing where the cast will go out after the show,” says Brock. “We tell the audience, if you want to talk about the show come with us. It’s simple and works well for our audience.”

The Idiopathic Ridiculopathy Consortium also hosts script-in-hand readings that are not held in their theatre space, partially because of the physical confines of their theatre space—an issue that is explored further in the Challenges section of this paper:

We hold our script-in-hand readings at L’Etage (a night club, cabaret, and performance space) located down the road from where IRC performs). We pick an author, one of the better known. For our first one—the only one we’ve done so far—we did a short work by Edward Albee. We moved, we got up, we did it. We put dramaturgical notes in the program. The audience was close to 70 people in a space like a living room. A lot of the people were our audience we’ve been seeing since 2006 but we had a lot of new people in—college students, literary people, English lit people. That was our new audience. There’s a group of people here in Philadelphia who really like going to readings. It’s not a big commitment. This was a free event but we attached a pay-what you can to it. We wanted to see what people would donate if we didn’t put a ticket price on it. (For us it’s a minor revenue
we’re paying the actors, we do pay the director). We made close to $500 and budgeted $250. Our annual budget is only $130,000. It was really exciting to see people throwing money at us. We have two more scheduled for this year. The discussion that followed was so fascinating and something I had never seen. With most discussions I see generally they have the same pattern, people are spread out. I don’t like these things. We want to get something up. We wanted it to be a conversation about the themes of the play. We’re trying to select material that reflects our world right now. The conversation was really fabulous and I had many people come say, 'this is perfect.' It got political. We got into Albee—his family, his relationship with his mom and grandma. I see this programming as core.

As was discussed earlier in this paper, We Players learned from the Study how connected their audiences are to place. “We’re working up in Sonoma this year,” says Chavez. (Previously We Players had only performed in the immediate Bay Area.) “We’ve reached out to the local art center there, the local community foundation, schools that are adjacent to the project site. We’ve done a little of it in the past but we’re doing more now because we realize that people are drawn to the park site because of the play and they want to keep building relationships with the park site. We want to get more people who are local to go back to the park site.”

At Dallas Theatre Center they began to launch dedicated programs in certain neighborhoods around the city. In the 2014-15 season they launched their first program in South Oak Cliff, which is about six to ten miles from the theatre. “We did free acting workshops in heart of the community every Saturday in the fall with teenagers. It was
engaging, entertaining, and inspiring. As we build and dream new programs we spend two or three months discussing it. We have to have a conversation first,” says Hull. They also identified City Council members and went out into communities to engage with these folks:

We created for them an engagement cycle. We made a point of contact, listened a lot, and crafted things out of the resources that the community holds, then enfolded them into the regular workings of the theatre. It was all taught by someone who’s a part of the mainstage, an artist. This was all in place before we went to the first rec center. We invited the whole staff to tour the site we would work with. Finance came, general management came. We had lunch. We started dreaming. Staff started dreaming about ways we could work.

ON RELATIONSHIPS WITH COMMUNITY MEMBERS

Several organizations noted fostering relationships with community members, much like the Dallas Theatre Center examples about going out into the South Oak Cliff neighborhood. From our conversations we saw this done in three interesting ways: to have a community ambassador act as a cultural consultant for a show, to find ambassadors based on an “audience design” practice, and to put a playwright directly in the community while the writer was creating their play.

Golden Thread in San Francisco has community advocates for every show but crystalized their approach last year and moved forward with it for their production of The Most Dangerous Highway in the World. Yeghiazarian says:
With this show we had a cultural consultant who helped with casting and feedback – not feedback on the text, but feedback on design. She worked with the director and designers. She provided us with images, examples, with language. She had a very specific focus on cultural truthfulness. The other community advocate who’s helping with production, he’s interested in theatre and how to produce his own. He has really campaigned for the production within the Afghan community in the Bay Area. He secured an interview on Afghan TV. They have all done great promotion in the Afghan community. In this case that’s how it happens. I don’t know if that will always be the case. It worked beautifully with this show and we’re hoping to repeat the success with this show with the next.

Kristen Jackson at Woolly Mammoth still uses the “audience design” approach that was implemented when connectivity began at Woolly Mammoth, before Jackson joined the company:

The practice of audience design is to identify who are the groups for whom the play will be relevant, and finding these people and partnering with them to create dialogue around the play. Those partners act as ambassadors, which is how I’m gaining access or not gaining access [to communities]. My concentration is more on the depth of things rather than breadth (butts in seats). If 'House Lights Up' events are well attended, if partners are happy and want to continue, if I’ve managed to get a good number of folks to come see the show, if I’ve started the relationship, this is how I measure success.

People’s Light tried an outreach and engagement tactic wherein which they placed
the playwright into the community as the writer was writing the play. The program is called New Play Frontiers and is a residency and commissioning program in which playwrights from across the country are selected and embedded in local communities and connected with partners—their issues and people—to inspire new work about American identity. Berkman explains:

The playwright’s charge is to immerse themselves into these communities and find stories that have a broader national interest. Our job is to match make those writers, nurture and cultivate a relationship with community organizations, and help provide resources in tandem with the play development program. The first one we’ve worked on will have its world premiere next season. The arc is nearing the pot at the end of the rainbow. (We’ll find out how many new audiences are in that pot…) The show will premiere in June 2017. This is a very, very long term strategy. It might be five years until we learn, which is ten years since we conceived of the program. We’re now looking at how these relationships can enter into the bloodstream of the whole organization. We have a partner in Westchester, PA who has hosted Dominique Morriseau. He’s brought his father’s group to *All My Sons*. He’s brought our people to these organizations. We’ve partnered with their fundraisers and their community days. That reciprocity is growing. We’re seeing that in a number of different instances. We’re asking the questions in fundraising and marketing—how are we managing this relationship, how is it helping us to build bridges? We’ll find out how this has manifested over a long period of time. In this instance, this particular individual happened to be
a good friend of mine. He was new at his organization. He was trying to turn it around. Other partners were found through staff and board. It’s a whole mix. A lot of these relationships are now two degrees from the original source. The show we’re producing next spring/summer, the first point of contact came through a company member (David Bradley) who’s part of a public history program. Then we had a donor, an Alexander instructor, who connected us with another organization.

**ON TICKETING**

Audience engagement cannot be discussed without touching on ticketing issues. Most organizations we spoke with allocate a certain number of tickets towards their audience engagement efforts. Some are complimentary seats, some start at a lower price point than the average ticket, some are discounted. Some of these seats are reduced from the average price point and paired with an activity, as is seen in an example from Orlando Shakespeare Theater.

Orlando Shakespeare Theater has a “$25 for Under 35” program that used to just be a discount. On those nights there would be a happy hour where participants could purchase drinks for half price and about 20 people participated each night of the event. This year they tried a new approach. Braillard elaborates,

This year we said, for an extra 20 bucks we’ll do an extra themed activity for that night and you don’t have to be that age to buy the add-on package. For Spamalot we did a stage combat. For Art we did a Jackson Pollack. For Peter and the Starcatcher we made paper lanterns. The first two we did were very
successful then it totally died. For us it was a way for us to find another experience for us to engage with audiences. It fell flat on its face. We're re-looking at it for next year and thinking what worked and what didn’t. For Vanya and Sonia and Masha and Spike we had a costume party. No one did it. No one bought. We thought everyone would want to dress up. We cancelled it and were afraid people would randomly show up in costume. We did a Jane Austin dance party. It was $20 extra to do that, like a cotillion. That sold out. We had to add more.

Examples of ticketing strategy that don’t include adding an activity to a ticket include ones from Dallas Theatre Center, People’s Light, and Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company. When Dallas Theatre Center launched their program at South Oak Cliff, residents of the community could get $5 tickets. “We didn’t rent a bus and go pick up 50 people,” says Hull. “We put the onus in the hands of our friends. They have to find their way through the system.” At People’s Light they instituted several community-specific discount codes that the director of community investment—or anyone on staff who reaches out to the right people, for the right dates, to meet the right capacity—could use. Berkman says, “We do whatever we can to make the theatre not exclusive on a financial or age basis.” Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company has 150 seats earmarked as connectivity seats for every production. “Those are seats I’m aiming to fill through comps and different price points, and I feel I’ve been successful,” says Jackson.

**CHALLENGES**

Common challenges sprung up during the course of speaking with Intrinsic Impact
Study participants, including the lack of space, the time it takes to do audience engagement work well, a lack of technology to support audience segmentation, the cost of hiring people to help with the work, and tracking impact into the future so one could do a cost/benefit assessment of the work.

In 2010 the 52nd Street Project opened its current facility which includes, for the first time in the company’s history, its very own theatre. “Lack of space was a barrier to doing [audience engagement] events before we had our own building. It was a great challenge,” admits John Sheehy from the 52nd Street Project. He continues:

When we did events before we had the logistics of getting from one place to another so a lot of people would just come to the theatre and leave. We did cultivation events that were smaller and offsite, at a board member's apartment, for example, which limited it to about one-third the attendance we accommodate here in our new space. Now when we do off-site events they're about going to a place to make it attractive to donors. You’re going to that place for an event, not because you have to.

Having their own space has really allowed the Project to grow and expand their engagement events, and keep those events in their home.

The Idiopathic Ridiculopathy Consortium does not currently have their own venue. They perform in Walnut Street Theatre’s studio space. Brock explains the challenge:

The problem we face now is that in the space we’re in we have to do these big shows in a tiny space. We make artistic accommodations. I do think the audience feels connected to the work because the space is so small, they're right on top of it, but it doesn’t allow us to do receptions in the space. We
tried. It doesn’t work. We literally had to pull the events out of the space and
put them somewhere else.

The Idiopathic Ridiculopathy Consortium moved their ancillary events to a cabaret/bar
space down the street called L’Etage, a night club, cabaret and performance space
whose interior has a very 1920s-style which reflects the time period in which most
absurdist writers were working. Brock says, “L’Etage is a very specific place. People like
it, though. They keep asking us to do more over there. Having that is making up for
what we can’t do in the other space.”

Orlando Shakespeare Theater notes cost as one of their big challenges when it
comes to doing audience engagement work—but not just the cost of marketing the
activities, the cost of hiring artists to help. “As a marketer it’s almost easier to impose
these experiences on the kids. The actors [in those shows] are not Equity.” The cost of,
and parameters in working with, Equity actors is a big barrier for the company in doing
more audience engagement for productions that aren’t geared towards young
audiences.

At American Shakespeare Company, most of the barriers have been
 technological. Amy Wratichford notes a technical challenge they have to advancing their
audience engagement work:

We want to segment our database into different groups based on how often
they interact with us. We have 60,000 accounts; 20,000 active in any given
year. However, with our system, except doing it on an ad hoc report, we
haven’t figured out a way to do the segmentation we want, and we don’t have
the money to spend to get that system now. We have lots of thoughts, and
we’re data geeks, but in order to do all the things we want to do we need a level of expertise and technology we just don’t have right now.

Also looking towards data, Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company has faced a challenge in tracking the impact of their connectivity work, but has taken great strides towards tracking the work in more tangible ways. Jackson elaborates on the challenges of tracking House Lights Up events, and their show-by-show model:

We’ve hired a new person who’s a data analyst. His title is ‘patron insight analyst.’ He’s coming back to us and saying, this is what I’m seeing, this is what I’m hearing. Anecdotally some of the behaviors I’ve seen is that there are people who are actually connected to Woolly through the House Lights Up events—they are regular House Lights Up attendees and irregular show attendees. The solution has all to do with strengthening the follow-up with those folks. Another challenge we have is, because of the show-by-show nature of our connectivity work, there are people who might very clearly see ‘oh yes it makes sense for us to partner with you because this show touches on the specific themes that are relevant to our work.’ What happens when we don’t have shows with those themes the next season? This is a challenge I actively work towards. This is what happens when they come through an affinity-interest rather than a theatre-interest. What we’re trying to do is find a way to be better organize those community leaders to develop not just a relationship with the plays but with the organization. We want them to be more amendable to coming back in the future to see something that might not touch directly on their interests or might not be in their wheelhouse. We want
to get them to buy into Woolly and not just a particular show.

Torange Yeghiazarian from Golden Thread says one of their biggest barriers to doing more audience engagement work is the time. “To do audience engagement well is very time consuming,” she says, “You could do it full-time 24/7. There’s no end. We’re looking at how much community outreach we do and how much we should do. Currently we have to decide in terms of staffing, do we have the money to maintain the level of activity?”
INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS

52nd Street Project

John Sheehy, director of development and marketing

Interview conducted by Alli Houseworth in 2016

American Repertory Theater

Brendan Shea, education and community programs associate

Interview conducted by Alli Houseworth in 2016

American Shakespeare Center

Amy Wretchford, managing director

Interview conducted by Alli Houseworth in 2016

Arena Stage

Linda Lombardi, literary manager

Neal Racioppo, director of marketing

Interview conducted by Alli Houseworth in 2016

Bay Area Children’s Theatre

Min Kahng, marketing manager and casting director

Nina Meehan, executive director

Interview conducted by Lily Janiak in 2014
Bristol Riverside Theatre
Rayna Adams, marketing director
Interview conducted by Alli Houseworth in 2016

Broadway by the Bay
Amanda Folena, artistic director
Interview conducted by Lily Janiak in 2014

California Shakespeare Theater
Marilyn Langbehn, marketing and PR manager
Janet Magleby, director of marketing and communications
Rebecca Novick, associate artistic director
Interview conducted by Lily Janiak in 2014

City Lights Theater Company
Lisa Mallette, artistic director
Interview conducted by Lily Janiak in 2014

Cutting Ball Theater Company
Suzanne Appel, managing director
Interview conducted by Lily Janiak in 2014
Dallas Theatre Center
Rachel Hull, director of education and community enrichment
Interview conducted by Lily Janiak in 2014

Golden Thread Productions
Torange Yeghiazarian, founding artistic director
Interview conducted by Alli Houseworth in 2016

Orlando Shakespeare Theater
Melissa Mason Braillard, director of marketing and communications
Interview conducted by Alli Houseworth in 2016

People’s Light
Abby Adams, artistic director and CEO
Zak Berkman, producing director
Amy Wilson, director of data insight and Tessitura specialist
Interview conducted by Alli Houseworth in 2016

The Idiopathic Ridiculopathy Consortium
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**We Players**

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Interview conducted by Alli Houseworth in 2016

**Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company**

Kristen Jackson, connectivity director

Interview conducted by Alli Houseworth in 2016