

Calling All Teenagers

Does your organization have what it takes to pull teens out of MySpace and into your space?

BY ANNA BATCKE



Chicago arts consultant Anna Batcke (in white jacket) spoke to cultural organization representatives during a November workshop, "The Culture of Cool," presented by the Broward Cultural Division.

If you believe the hype – and today's media – you may have doubts about involving teenagers in your organization. By most accounts – news reports, reality television and dramatic characterizations alike – today's teens are overscheduled, overstimulated, isolated by technology and spoiled. It would be natural to believe that given the circumstances, teenagers are uninterested in the offerings cultural organizations provide.

Not so. Current caricatures of teens are just as one-dimensional as they've always been. While it's easy to believe the negative stereotypes, today's teenager is part of a generation primed for cultural involvement. They are diverse, open-minded, curious and in search of experiences beyond the everyday. Many arts organizations and museums have seen a great response in marketing to and

programming for teenagers, and the future looks brighter all the time.

The Teen Cultural Revolution

Many cultural organizations begin teen programming and marketing efforts as an extension of their educational missions. Frequently sandwiched between adult programming and children's programming, these organizations have in the past struggled with making teen programming relevant and appealing. Teenagers have frequently been seen as being a hard audience to communicate with and resistant to cultural subject matter.

With trends and generations constantly changing, programming has to be equally dynamic and nimble. And yet rising expectations for teen involvement by many grant-making agencies and foundations have put

the cry for teen programming at a fever pitch in the cultural world. The message is clear – to remain relevant, arts and cultural organizations need to attract and retain teen audiences.

Additionally, many organizations that have seen slipping attendance figures recognize teens as an important part of the audience development equation. For many organizations, teenagers join young professionals and families as highly sought-after, though traditionally underrepresented, groups. The best cultural organizations in the United States have come to understand that there are incredible benefits to engaging teens in their activities. In addition to being powerful economic drivers – teens spent nearly \$160 billion in 2005 – teenagers are powerful grassroots marketers, and typically help to create "buzz" about what is "hot" in their areas.

Teens also play a large role in helping to make choices about family activities and time spent with siblings and parents. Perhaps most importantly, many cultural organizations have gotten wise to the fact that teenagers make up a very promising pool of future culture patrons and arts supporters. Early exposure to cultural activities can lead to a lifetime commitment to philanthropy.

The benefits of a teen presence in your organization extend beyond increased attendance figures or strong grant reports. Involving teens can provide fresh energy to your offerings. An interactive or collaborative relationship with teenagers can provide a unique perspective and a substantial contribution to programs and products.

Moving Beyond the Mall

In spite of being a generation that has been exposed to sports, lessons, extracurriculars and a world of experience through the internet and cable television since infancy, today's teens have much in common with teens

from past generations when it comes to casual social activities. According to a 2005 Teen Research Unlimited poll, over half of the teens surveyed still visit the mall and the movie theater once a week. Teens also spent casual time at their homes and at the homes of their friends. The regularity – and monotony – of these experiences provides cultural organizations an opportunity to engage teens by doing what cultural organizations do best: creating experiences beyond the everyday.

There are, of course, some dangers in the world of teen programming and marketing. Poorly executed programming significantly damages credibility with teenagers. Teens have massive communication channels and are not afraid to share negative experiences. Teenagers are also highly skeptical creatures who will easily see through shallow gestures and self-serving products. They know they are valuable to organizations and corporations, and they expect to be addressed appropriately through programming and products.

Teenagers also demand innovation, style and credibility. To be associated with anything that isn't stylish or credible can be seen as damaging to a teen's reputation – which is a very valuable currency with their peers. Lastly, while teens have massive spending power, they make very determined choices on how and when to spend their money on entertainment and leisure. Many teens are thrifty and interested in value.

5 Simple Steps

How can cultural organizations attract teens?

1 Get a teenager – or 10 – to help you. Consider involving teenagers in the planning and execution of teen programming. No one knows what appeals to teens more than a teen, and no one can be more useful in imagining teen-friendly experiences or promoting events and programs than a teen. Advisory

boards and committees are a good mechanism for attracting teens to your project. Contact local schools' arts and humanities departments for clues or for collaboration. Paid positions for teens – such as a part-time position or internship – will give teens a unique and valuable work experience in addition to ensuring that your project gets the proper attention and investment. Ultimately, giving teens a sense of ownership will strengthen your offerings.

In marketing matters, offering incentives to a teen street team – concert tickets, small electronics, iTunes gift cards – can help make a teen marketing team active, enthusiastic and dependable.

2 Partner with an individual, group or organization that already has a strong relationship with teenagers. Get creative and invite these individuals and groups to get involved with your event or programming. From creative artistic collaborations to full-blown sponsorship opportunities, there are a number of ways partner organizations and small businesses can enhance a cultural event for teenagers. Most corporations, small businesses, artists and youth organizations know that events like these can be incredibly beneficial to all parties, and most are eager to become involved in teen-focused events.

3 Do what you do best, with a few tweaks. Leverage your resources to give teenagers an experience that surprises them, excites them, challenges their perceptions of who they are and leaves them wanting more. Involve their interests – music, sports, dancing and food are all safe bets, taking into account local and regional trends as well.

Remember that most teens prefer to be in a peer environment, where they can meet up with their friends and meet new people very casually. Keep formal elements to a minimum, and activities light, active and flexible. Make sure any front line staff, secu-

rity, ushers or adult facilitators are aware of the audience and the teen-friendly “vibe” of the evening. Relax rules (such as noise) where possible, but hold your teen guests to an adult level of accountability. Most importantly, give teenagers an experience that will leave them talking for weeks after with their peers.

4 Remember the barriers. Teenagers, like adult low users of arts and culture organizations, list many issues as complications to becoming more active cultural participants. Expense, time, transportation and parking hassles, and programs that lack appeal are all reasons that teenagers don't visit cultural organizations more frequently. When planning teen programming, take into consideration busy times (homecoming, prom, SAT testing) and note school holidays. Affordable parking, dining and ticket/admission fees are also important amenities to weigh when planning teen programs and events.

Whenever possible, create aggressive marketing campaigns. Remember to strike a balance between traditional advertising and promotions and grassroots and guerrilla marketing tactics. Good bets for traditional advertising campaigns involve concentrating on local teen media, such as radio stations – and grassroots tactics like street teams when marketing to teenagers. And yes, this means MySpace, but MySpace marketing should be coming from peers – not directly from your organization.

5 Be sincere in your approach. Teenagers appreciate respect, and will recognize shallow or self-serving efforts to include them in your organization. Invest the same amount of time, energy, creativity, enthusiasm and budget in teenage audiences that you would other high-priority groups. Value them for the contributions that they will inevitably bring – and remember that you're helping to nurture the million dollar donor of 2046. ★