# Using the arts to build community; Using community to build the arts.

**After researching the Indianapolis arts community** for two years, Rebecca Ryan summarizes her findings in good news/bad news terms. The good news is that "Indianapolis has a wide variety and high caliber of art in all forms—visual, performance, dance and theater," says Ryan, lead economist with Next Generation Consulting (NGC) of Madison, Wis. The bad news: "Indianapolis has a wide variety and high caliber of art in all forms."

Add to the mix the many professional sports events that Indianapolis offers and the result is a competition for patrons, especially for patrons under the age of 40. The challenge, according to Ryan, is for each arts organization "to get out of the pile and differentiate itself" and to do it in ways that appeal to young audiences.

Supported by two Endowment grants to the Arts Council of Indianapolis, Ryan and her team of consultants designed back-to-back projects that had separate-but-related goals. First, NGC conducted an in-depth study of how young professionals view the various arts venues available to them in Indianapolis. The purpose was to shed light on why more young professionals didn't engage in the arts as patrons, volunteers and board members.

Second, NGC helped arts organizations implement some of the audience-building ideas that the research generated. The goal was to translate the report's findings into measurable results.

"We didn't want to give the research to the arts organizations without offering to help interpret and make use of it," explains Greg Charleston, president of the Arts Council. "We wanted to emphasize to them that attracting younger audiences is important to the future of their organizations and to our city. It's going to take sustained, strategic commitment by each organization, and we will achieve greater success if we all work together."

## WHAT'S AT STAKE?

Charleston and Ryan agree that if successful, this series of strategies will result in benefits that go far beyond standing-

**OPPOSITE** As president of the Indianapolis Arts Council, Greg Charleston has his hands full encouraging all the local arts groups to take their places on the ever-widening cultural stage in the city. He pauses in the Artsgarden, an Endowment-funded venue built above the intersection of Illinois and Washington streets in downtown Indianapolis.

room-only performances and brisk season ticket sales. A lively arts community becomes a marketing tool for a city trying to attract new businesses and for companies trying to recruit talented young professionals to their workforces. As the size of the young professional population increases, that growth becomes yet another selling point for the city. A deep pool of job candidates is a community asset that every human resources department covets. "Many companies are now deciding where to relocate or expand on the basis of the concentration of skilled professionals in the area," explains Ryan.

She bases her comments on NGC's years of creating "handprints" of communities across the country. This service evaluates a city's appeal to the 20-to-40 age group and measures the appeal according to seven indexes that young professionals say they value. "The arts show up in three of the seven indexes," says Ryan. "We have statistics that prove that young professionals take the arts into consideration when they decide whether to locate to an area."

This trend represents a "huge shift of mentality," says Charleston, and it is causing communities to look at themselves in terms of what they have to offer. "When I was growing up, most people went wherever a company sent them," he recalls. "First they took the jobs, and then they worried about where they would be located. That has all changed. Increasingly we have well-educated people in their 20s who first choose where they want to live and then look for jobs in that area. A city can't attract young professionals if it doesn't have what young professionals want."

## BLENDING ARTS AND TECHNOLOGY

When it comes to the arts, young audiences want many of the same services and amenities that appeal to older patrons. Two key differences are that young professionals see the arts as a way to network with persons in their age group, and they expect to use technology to facilitate and enrich these art experiences from beginning to end. This includes learning about events from Web sites, reading reviews of performances posted by patrons, accessing interviews with artists, viewing seating charts, and purchasing and printing tickets electronically. "And they want to be able to do all this from home, online and at midnight," says Marti, an NGC consultant. "Young professionals are very comfortable with technology, and they want to use it throughout."

As a direct or indirect result of the NGC research, several members of the Indianapolis arts community have introduced social opportunities for young professionals and are experimenting with creative uses of technology. As a sampling:

» The Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra has launched FORTE, aimed at patrons in the 20-to 40-something age group who are interested in meeting new people while supporting the ISO. Membership is free and events range from happy-hour gatherings to tailgate parties at Conner Prairie Museum before the popular and casual Symphony on the Prairie series.

» The IMA encourages patrons to visit iTunes U to download free audio and video content related to exhibitions, programs, events and the IMA's permanent collection.

» The Indiana Repertory Theatre invites theatergoers to log onto the IRT Web site and post reviews—thumbs up or down—of current plays. As a way to build relationships between audiences and performers, an IRT artist blog is under construction.

» Indyarts.org is a newly enhanced Web site, sponsored by the Arts Council, which offers a searchable arts calendar, links to local arts organizations, lists opportunities to meet artists and publishes schedules of Artsgarden activities.

## WORKING FOR A COMMON SOLUTION

Indianapolis earned high praise from NGC for the amount of coordination and collaboration that occurs among members of the arts community. Taking this collaborative model to the next level, the Arts Council used part of its Endowment grant to host a National Summit on Arts Audience Development for arts executives. More than 200 participants from 14 states convened for the two-day event. They were drawn by a common concern: Arts audiences are growing gray; in fact, some studies claim the average age of an arts patron in America is 52 and inching upward.

"We talked about the NGC research, did some hands-on workshops using model case studies from around the country, and we shared a lot of practical information," says Charleston. "It was energizing. At the end everybody went away asking, 'When can we do this again?'" He hopes to add a second summit to the arts calendar for 2009.