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Audience Development and Community Engagement

Final- Unicorn Theatre

Strategic Analysis

The organization I have chosen is the Unicorn Theatre in Kansas City, Missouri. Their mission is to enhance the Kansas City community by developing and producing high-quality, thought-provoking plays that have never been seen in the region. We illuminate social issues by shining a light on diversity and inclusive stories which include race, religion and gender identity. Unicorn creates opportunities for the advancement of emerging and established actors, directors, playwrights, designers, technicians and administrative staff. Their vision is by producing provocative new plays Unicorn Theatre fosters the next generation of great American writers and artists, creating innovative and intimate theatrical experiences that transcend the ordinary. We inspire the community to think and feel deeply; to see the world in new and different ways. Unicorn strives to be one of the preeminent homes for new plays in the country.

The current state of the Audience Development seems slim. They offer three performances a week that are a 'Pay What You Can' model. If someone is interested in that they must go to the venue day of and pay at the box office and they are subject to availability. When I reached out to the Director of Marketing, he stated that their audience development strategies are incorporated into their marketing and fundraising. He did not elaborate further.

In terms of Community Engagement, this is where there is major room for improvement. When I spoke to the Director of Marketing and the Director of Development, they both said there is nothing in place for community engagement plans. They said they felt their organization was not the right fit due to their size and limitation.

I disagree with this analysis of the organization, and I feel this is the perfect size and type of theatre program to shoot for the stars in terms of Community Engagement. My plan is the first restructure the organization and reframe their mindset around community engagement. This will lead to hiring a Director of Education and Community Engagement. The first steps of the plan will start internally to build a strong foundation to start the external community engagement. Once internal is secured and strong then the plan for external is to start reaching out to communities that we have been struggling to see and interact with at the organization. A big way I think we can connect with the community is to join the Chiefs parade after they win the Superbowl. Handing out canvas tote bags with a flyer of the season and a better explanation of the pay what you can performances. There should also be an invitation to the Open House we will be doing. Given the area that it is we should also offer the space during the day to schools and have artists facilitate a day of theatre games and creating. The lobby can be used as an open space where the community can use it to host meetings, relax, study, and there we can host free events and workshops open to the public. I also think with sports being a big part of KC they should offer watch parties when they don't have shows going on as well as late night cabaret style performances since they are also in a late-night area. A specific example would be the FIFA World Cup that is hosted in KC in 2026. If we can find sponsorship for these events, it can be free to the public or at least at a very small ticket price. Or offering a silent disco in the theatre and lobby. I also would like to offer up the exterior and maybe the interior walls of the space to

local artists to design. This would be on a rotation and would change on a schedule TBD at a later date.

Research

I am basing my recommendation on a number of factors. First being the area where the theatre is located. The Theatre is in the Midtown-Westport area which is central location of culture: art, shopping, restaurants, and nightlife. This area is also close Crowne Center area that has several museums, a convention center and Union Station. Union Station which does service Amtrak, also is full of theatres, museum exhibits and public attractions. When people visit KC, this is an area they tend to stay nearby. The past two Superbowl parades have ended at Union Station.

Another factor in my recommendation is the interests of the area and population. KC was once a very segregated area and even today you can see remnants of that in the infrastructure. There has been progress but one thing I experienced that really brought everyone together was the sports teams in the area: Kansas City Chiefs (Football), KC Royals (Baseball), Sporting KC (Soccer). Using an interest people are already interested in to get them to interact with our organization will hopefully build a relationship that leads to them attending other events and performances.

Nightlife in this area is centered around alcohol and there is a growing trend amongst young people where many are choosing to go alcohol free. So having other alternatives of fun late-night options would be appealing to this demographic. This type of late-night option can also be appealing to those communities that don't feel welcome in the Westport Power and Lights,

which is a bar and club area that has been known for racist remarks, actions and microaggressions. This could be a safer more welcoming alternative.

An example of some of these ideas that I have come from Southbank Centre in London. It is a Performing Arts Center which is different than this organization, but I feel some of these ideas can be implemented at a similar or smaller scale. One thing I noticed they do is offer a free space indoors for anyone to walk in and use. I saw people coming in for meetings, lunch, a place to do homework or work, play dates, actual dates and more. They also offer free events that range from mommy and me type classes to dance events. All these events are free, and they noticed that it gave a space of community for certain groups of people that might struggle with finding that such as the elderly and parents to young children. Another example of some of the ideas I have come from the book this semester such as open houses, 'swag' such as pens, bags and whatnot that is thoughtful, and ways to open the space to the public.

All these actions will incorporate DEI by working with community leaders and seeing what their community is looking for. We will also approach each event as equitable as possible by putting in comparable time, resources and money into each area. There will also be a new Anti-Racist Statement that will be updated and reviewed every year.

Action Steps

The plan to implement these steps will go as followed:

Step 1: Hiring

The current Artistic Director is leaving, and this is an opportunity to look for one that has a drive and dedication to community engagement. Once one is found and hired, we will meet with them and find and hire a director of Education and Community Engagement. At this time,

we will also hire a DEI consultant to assist us in building a foundation that all these new programs and actions.

Step 2: Reframe and Restructure

This step is focused mainly internally. We will start with focus groups, surveys, and conversation with the staff ranging from Leadership, Full-time, Part-time, Independent Contractors, and Artists. From there we will work with the DEI consultant to organize the data and see what we are doing well and what needs to be improved or address. We will also be hosting mandatory paid workshops centered around DEI for all employees and an onboarding section for artists and independent contractors as a part of their original contract. Other things that are a part of this step is to rework the anti-racist statement and share that with everyone internally as well as posted to our website with the date it was enacted. We will also look at wages and find a way to make the pay equitable and livable for all. This is also where the planning for the Open House, Parade, and other events will begin.

Step 3: Community Outreach

Once we have a strong internal culture, we will move to reaching out to local community leaders. We will start with conversations with these leaders and gauging their interest in our organization. Finding out if they have heard about us, attended any performances or why they chose not. After actively listening we will continue the conversation about how we can improve our relationship with their community and ask what some things are their communities want, worry about, and need and see if we can be a part of the change or support what they want. This will take some time and while this is relationship building is happening, we will be engaging the

community by inviting them to events we have, attending events they host or meetings they hold to show our commitment to this partnership.

Step 6: Superbowl Parade

This event can be adjusted to different city-wide parades or events. The Chiefs have won two Superbowls in the past 4 years and are projected to possibly win a third this season. The parade in the city after the win has been hugely attended by the city as well as visitors of the surrounding areas. This is a great opportunity to reach a large audience of community members and show our support of the city. Here we can hand out canvas tote bags with a flyer of our upcoming season, information about the 'pay what you can' performances and an invitation to our Open House. There can also be temporary tattoos handed out to children.

Step 5: Open House

This Open House will be the launch of this new focus around community engagement. Everything we plan kicks off with this event. The open house will consist of free beverages and light snacks/food and include performances, tours, info flyers and free swag. I think this event should be held twice that week. Once in an evening either Wednesday or Thursday and then a day event on the weekend. This would hopefully fit everyone's schedule. The weekend one can also have activities geared towards children so families will feel welcome to attend.

Step 6: Continued Community Outreach

This step will be when we start to create these events, talks, etc., that the community leaders have voiced they want or need. We will partner with them to first bring events to the community and then later bring the community to our space for these events. These events can range from workshops with the schools in the space that are facilitated by artists we are currently

working with or have worked with in the past, opening the lobby as a free gathering space for community members, talks, and more. This is also an area where we can introduce watch parties as well as late-night events such as FIFA World Cup games, silent discos, cult-classic movies, late night cabaret, open mic nights and more. This is also where we would have a set structure in place for the walls to be designed by local artists of different communities.

Step 7: Analysis and Debrief

This final step is where we look back at the previous steps and analysis and evaluate how they went. We will use this step to see what worked and what didn't. We will include community leaders in this process and see what their thoughts are after and what is still missing from our partnerships.

Step 8: New Ideas

This is where we will come up with new ideas and events and continue to grow. This is also where we will look at our anti-racist statement and adjust it according to new goals, new struggles or issues.

Metrics of Success

The biggest metric of success for me would be to look at the amount of dark time there is in the space. The lower the amount of dark time the better. I want to see that our space is being used as much as possible by the community. I would then look at the ratio of time used for performances and paid events versus free events and open lobby time. This plan is not just about selling tickets to the performance but about being a cultural center for the community. We obviously want them to attend performances, but we also need them to feel like this space is theirs to take up.

Another metric I would look at is how many partnerships we have. These partnerships can be with communities, other organizations, the city, schools, etc.. We should look at how many there are and how much we work with them. A successful partnership would be with a group that co-hosts events or performances consistently through the year. We are wanting to support communities, but we also want them to support our work. If all our events are solo, then we are not doing a good job with our connections and relationships. This could be as simple as a being a partner in name or financially only. Or it can be an equal partnership where they help facilitate or lead events. Provide artists, vendors or experts to support the event or be a part of it. It would also be measuring where are artists come from that design the walls. We want it to be inclusive to all and we can measure how many communities are represented each year.

From an audience development standpoint, we should also look at how many tickets we are selling for paid events and productions. Are these full price or discounted tickets and what is the increase. This would also be where we would study the demographics of the audience to see if we are reaching these audiences with our theatre programming.

Internally I would want to measure the demographics of the employees at all levels and make sure we are diverse in our hiring practices. It would also be a success if our turnover rate is low.

Timeline

This timeline would be one year and would be readdressed and changed yearly going forward.

Months 1-3: During this time is when we will hire the people listed above and work on gathering data internally. Meeting with community leaders will be during this time as well as planning the Open House and other future events.

Months 4-6: This is when we will use the data, we gathered both internally and externally and adjust our practices and events to fit the needs of the organization and the community. This is also when the new anti-racist statement will be created, and the mandatory DEI training and meetings will begin. Depending on the timeline this is where the Superbowl parade will be held, or it will be very close so the planning for that will be now.

Months 7-9: If the Superbowl parade falls in this time frame then all efforts will be leading up to this and the Open House which follows shortly after. This is where we start the wall mural initiatives and find our first set of artists to fill the walls. We will continue to work with community leaders and make plans for future events.

Months 10-12: This is a time of reflection as well as wrap up any planned events. We will look back on the work we did and see what went well or needs improvement so we can adjust for the next year. We will look at our anti-racist statement and see if we stayed true to the statement and if there were any goals we reached and if any new goals, statements need to be added. We will when share the new one internally and externally. This point in time is when we meet with community leaders and get their thoughts on the previous year and what they hope for in the future. We will then start planning to do this all over again the next year.

The Future

The future of this organization I see expansion. I see the space growing larger to fill a larger need with the community. I see an opportunity for education programs with children in the area to learn about how to work in a theatre or how to run a non-profit. I want the community partnerships to grow so that everything that happens in the space is co-sponsored by the theatre as well as at least one community entity. I would like to see theatre come to communities either

travelling to schools to perform or going into non-traditional spaces to bring something unique and exciting to the community. I envision artists in the space facilitating workshops with community members interested in creating something and working together to create a performance that reflects the stories they want heard. Overall, I want to see the Unicorn Theatre go beyond what they expect for themselves currently and grow into something that no one has seen before in Kansas City or the US as a whole. This a goal that could take longer than 5 years, but I think there is a real opportunity to grow and fill the space they currently have and find new creative ways to overflow that in a way that builds up the community around it. This can be done by having the lobby be open as much as possible to the public and to show up to community events in the area.