

PERFORMING ARTS DESIGN FOR A NEW GENERATION

By Bradley Fritz, AIA

The Millennial Generation has notoriously disrupted consumer industries across the board and around the world. Taxis are now ride shares, hotels are now private residences brokered by amalgamation services, and everything from your coffee to your dog walker can be summoned instantly and paid for via mobile apps.

Millennials are the largest group within the labor market, but Generation X will remain a powerful influence – and a reliable source of consumer dollars – for many years to come. As a result, performing arts organizations are facing a generational gap: appealing to those who are currently their biggest donor base while at the same time attracting younger audiences who will sustain them into the future.

Some performing arts organizations have had success with offerings like social media-friendly performances, interactive experiences, and performances focused on subjects of greater interest to Millennials. Programmatic offerings alone often do not bridge the gap, instead appealing only to one generation or the other. Organizations must supplement performance programming with other initiatives to bridge the gap. This is where design can offer a solution.

WHO ARE MILLENNIALS?

Millennials grew up just as the internet boom of the 1990s began transforming the way people access information, interact with each other, and make purchases. This experience made Millennials highly adaptive to new technology, and comfortable with virtual interactions of all types.

Millennials began to enter the workforce at the height of the Great Recession, just as unemployment was rising. For those fortunate enough to start their career, wages remained low for many years. The result is that Millennials have delayed major life events such as marriage, having children, and buying their first home.

Millennials are now entirely in the labor force, currently making them the largest population with disposable income. Combine that with a Huffington Post survey that shows 78% of the generation believes the arts are directly relevant to their lives, and one can become puzzled about why the performing arts are not connecting with Millennials.

DESIGNING FOR MILLENNIALS

Recognizing that programming is a critical component to attracting the Millennial Generation to theatres and concert halls around the country, the following case studies demonstrate success in doing so with the added element of design. Most performing arts venues are lucky to build new or undergo a major renovation even once in a generation, so it is imperative that – when the opportunity arises – the designs prepare the venues for future generations of patrons. The solutions presented below are by no means an exhaustive list, but the commonalities will provide clues to venue operators and their design teams alike about how to keep audiences coming through the doors.

THEATRE CEDAR RAPIDS - OPENING UP THE THEATRE EXPERIENCE TO THE PUBLIC

Theatre Cedar Rapids (TCR), like many other organizations and businesses in downtown Cedar Rapids, Iowa, suffered significantly in 2008 from the worst flood on record in the area. Like many theatres of its era, the performance space was surrounded by a bank of retail and office spaces that provided additional income for the property. Prior to the flood, almost all of those spaces had been vacant for many years resulting in a dead outward appearance despite the vibrant theatre programming going on inside.

While the flood determined the timing of the next renovation to the building, TCR seized the opportunity and determined the result. The organization took over most of the ground floor retail space that featured vast expanses of original plate glass windows connecting the spaces back to the lobby of the theatre. OPN Architects in Cedar Rapids, who led the renovation, designed stunning textured walls lit by color-changing LED lighting, framed by modern finishes and topped off with beautifully curated furniture arranged in conversational groupings.

The Linge Lounge was born. Patrons now have a comfortable place to grab a drink and a bite to eat before the performance. Passersby along the busy First Avenue corridor see vibrant and welcoming activity inside TCR instead of blank, dark windows. Tickets are not required to gain access to the lounge, meaning those with tickets can meet up with other friends before or after



the performance.

The visibility produced by the lounge has translated well into ticket sales according to Hannah Spina, a long-time volunteer at TCR and its current Outreach Coordinator. “The lounge patrons skew younger,” says Hannah. “Younger cast members also tend to stick around after the show and meet their friends.” Events in the lounge are often geared toward younger patrons as well, including live music, karaoke, and food and beverage tastings.

The lounge provides a luxurious and comfortable environment and offers patrons the ability to create an entire evening out with just one stop. Imagine parking once, grabbing a bite to eat in the lounge before the show, attending a performance just across the lobby, and then meeting up with friends in the lounge afterward to grab a drink. This “complete experience” is an attractive proposition for Millennials and has significantly helped Theatre Cedar Rapids connect with this younger audience.

BROWARD CENTER - TIERED OFFERINGS CUSTOMIZE THE EXPERIENCE

Paul Vaivoda AIA, LEED-AP BD+C, and Rebecca Durante NCIDQ, IIDA, LEED-AP, both principals with Wilson Butler Architects in Boston, agree with the concept of creating a complete experience to attract younger patrons but adds another layer to the conversation. Wilson Butler’s focus on the patron experience has brought the subject of Millennials front and center. Paul has seen success with designs that accommodate tiered experiences, allowing Millennials to choose what they are most interested in and a price point at which they are comfortable.

For the Broward Center for the Performing Arts in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, the Club Level at the Au-Rene Theatre provides an

appealing and unconventional experience. A ticket here gets you some of the best seats in the house with the option to view the performance from within the adjacent Club itself. Ticket holders also have access to a private bar and complimentary food. For Millennials with just a bit more disposable income, Club Level tickets provide a full evening of exclusivity. This tier of experience is partially geared toward developing the next generation of supporters for the organization, eventually transitioning ticket holders into donors.

Even a regular ticket to the Broward Center provide a complete high-class evening. Concessions is not the correct word for food and drink here, as the bars are designed to be approachable and more of a hospitality experience. Casual seating abounds and servers ensure that conversations won’t be interrupted to get another round. Everything, according to Paul, is designed to extend the stay of patrons, creating that complete experience and generating more income for the venue.

Tiered experiences have proven attractive to Millennials in many settings – everything from VIP tickets at beer festivals to music festivals. It is a recognition that, like any other generation, Millennials are not a single block of like-minded people. Translating this concept to the performing arts will allow venues to be attractive to a wide range of Millennials.

THE PEACE CENTER AND THE YERBA BUENA CENTER FOR THE ARTS - ADDING ATTRACTIVE ACCOUTREMENTS

Some venues take the concept of a complete experience even further, providing designed elements that supplement a night out. As Jodi Cobalt, the director of production at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, says, “The experience doesn’t start when they get to the theatre. It starts before.” Millennials are far less likely to own a

car and favor ride sharing instead. YBCA accommodates ride share arrivals and departures by providing designated and clearly marked ride share zones.

The YBCA also thinks beyond the performance schedules, providing public space that is open throughout the day. Comfortable seating, a bar, and even a ping pong table, bring potential audience members – especially younger ones – into the venue. Accommodating technology is also part of the package, including charging stations and open Wi-Fi. “We are curating the entire experience,” says Jodi.

A similar approach is taken at the Peace Center in Greenville, South Carolina, says Patron Services Manager Sarah Robertson. The venue features a large, visually striking lobby with artwork and lighting that is flattering for selfies. It is no surprise that younger audiences are documenting their experiences at levels that previous generations can find staggering. Good lighting and stunning backgrounds provide ample opportunities for photos and makes the venue look very attractive when thousands of other people see photos of their friends attending an event.

CONCLUSION

A well-curated programming event can, by itself, attract a younger audience to a venue, but what will keep them coming back, turning them from single-ticket holders to regular patrons? All of the case studies suggest one common element that has led to success in attracting Millennials – the experience. The modern execution of the experience – including thoughtful venue planning – is what will determine how well younger patrons respond.

A 2016 article by CNBC summarizes what many other studies have pointed at: Millennials are more interested in experiences than they are in material things. A venue that recognizes this and considers all the elements of a complete experience for a night out will be well suited to develop younger audiences into long-term patrons.

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RESOURCES

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