



Audience Development

Audience development is often described in one or more of the following ways: mysterious, exhausting, a game of chance, something your mother would be good at. Whatever your hang-up may be, know that you are the best candidate for this job. Who knows your music better? Who has a better sense of the kind of experience you want to create for your audience? This handout will help you step into this role with ideas to spark your creativity and best-practices to guide your work,

Target Audience

First, identify your target audience—who you want in the room at your concerts, who will be drawn to buy your music, who will follow your work online, etc. As tempting as it may be to define your audience in broad strokes (e.g. the Boston young professional community), the more specific you are, the greater chance you will have at developing strategies to reach a healthy and engaged audience. It's helpful to break down your target audience into three distinct groups:

1. *Your immediate audience* includes family, friends, colleagues, and existing supporters. It is easy to take this group for granted, but they are extremely important, especially when you are starting out. Numbers matter when you are booking independent gigs, and these people will make a strong foundation for your audience.
2. *The audience you would like to reach* includes people who like similar artists, frequent the venues you perform in, or know someone who is already in your immediate circle. A great first step is to connect with bands/ensembles and venues that you believe have a core audience that you would like to engage. Shared bills and opening slots are a great way to start attracting fans that you don't know personally. As you perform more frequently, you will start to get a better sense of who is actually coming consistently and can use this information to refine the definition of your target audience. The same logic applies to choosing publications and promotional websites to target for concert and CD reviews, gig listings etc. This sub-category of your audience is by far the most important—they should ideally comprise the bulk of your audience and continue to grow in number as your reputation develops.
3. *A surprise audience.* Every once in awhile it's good to seek out exposure or accept an offer to perform that may seem strange or off-track. This can be a great way of connecting with a new, untapped group of people that you may have overlooked or ruled out.

Above all, it's crucial to get to know your audience—find out who they are, what they like, where they go to get information about events, where they spend most of their time online, and what habits or attitudes they share. This will help you craft a strategy for *staying in touch* with your audience in between performances and determine what kind of information will be most relevant to share. Below are just a few of the ways you can connect with your audience and build a sense of community around your creative work.

Mailing list

Collecting emails during a performance is a good practice—make sure you are providing people with an easy way to give you their contact information. There's nothing more frustrating than trying to read email addresses scribbled in pencil or sharpie. If your aesthetic supports it, having an old fashioned typewriter or a dedicated computer is a good idea. If you have personnel who are handling CD or merchandise

sales, they can also encourage people to sign the list. Place an attractive sign or object next to your list to draw people to the table.

Create an organized system for storing email addresses you collect—you can use a simple excel sheet, or one of many online tools (see Mailchimp below). Include as much information about each person as you can, such as the date, city, and venue they signed-up at, and do this as soon after the event as possible while your memory is still fresh. Make sure you are able to search audience members by city or state, perhaps even by venue. This will allow you to send relevant newsletters to the right people, as opposed to a generic announcement every time you play a gig - something that can cause people to unsubscribe quickly.

When you are sending a newsletter out, you can choose to use an online program such as [Mailchimp](#), or send them directly from your personal email address. Using your personal email is a viable option if your mailing list is fairly small, but will be less practical as your list grows. Create an email account dedicated to this type of correspondence and make it very easy to recognize immediately. Always Bcc the addresses you include—it's common courtesy and breaking this rule will inevitably cost you a few subscriptions. Make your newsletters personal, funny, interesting, authentic and specific. There's a fine line between being engaging and overly communicative—it's up to you to find the right frequency and tone for your newsletter.

Social Networking

Online social networking tools such as Facebook and Twitter are popular ways to promote shows, spread news and share music with your audience. You can find a more in depth analysis of their role in our *Web Presence for Musicians* handout. However, some of the tips we outlined in the mailing list section apply to this realm as well. Inviting all of your Facebook friends to all of your gigs will very quickly lead them to ignore your invitations. Being geographically specific and personal in your invitations will yield much better results.

Artist Website

Your personal website is another valuable tool in developing a relationship with your audience. It's where fans can find in-depth information about your latest work and upcoming performances. (You can find tips on creating your website in our *Web Presence for Musicians* handout.) Try to keep your calendar up to date and include all the relevant information about each show you are playing: set times, ticket price, age restrictions, links to the other bands on the bill, venue accessibility, anything you think will encourage people to leave their homes and join you. If your website allows it, create a forum—a place where your fans can share their experience at your shows and excitement about your music. Provide a space where they can share content and ideas: photos and videos of your shows, thoughts about your set lists, requests for carpooling, etc. It's a great way to get unsolicited feedback and encourage word of mouth without investing a great deal of time. Some of the most successful band forums have hundreds of members who truly feel like a community.

Posters, Flyers, Stickers, Swag

The cost-benefit ratio of physical posters and flyers is hard to calculate. They can be expensive, environmentally unfriendly and time consuming to distribute. However, when done right, they can have a serious impact. It's a way for you to cast a wide net and catch people where they socialize, shop, and run errands.

The first step is to create a cohesive image for your promotional materials—this can include designing a logo, deciding on set fonts and colors, taking compelling press photos or collecting images that relate to your music. If you are not design savvy, hire a professional, or team up with an artist who is excited about your music. This person may be a fan already, or would do it in exchange for using your music for his/her project. If your promotional materials are visually appealing, fans will be compelled to share them and media outlets will be much more likely to feature your work.

Your posters should have a balance of striking imagery and need-to-know information. But, don't limit yourself to posters—think about other objects that might help get the word-out about your ensemble: stickers, t-shirts, buttons, travel mugs, canvas bags, etc. You can sell these at your shows, or use them as rewards for crowdsource campaigns or in-kind support of any kind.

Another factor that will affect the impact of your posters and flyers is *location*. Think of high-traffic areas that audience members (actual or potential) are likely to go: cafes, local businesses, performance venues, schools, train stations, bus stops, community boards, etc. You don't have to do this work alone—you can involve your most-dedicated fans in posting flyers in their places of work and/or neighborhoods.

Meaningful Ways for Fans to Get Involved

Another great way to engage your most dedicated fans is to involve them in the work of promoting your upcoming shows. Your “street team” can help with distributing posters and flyers, researching venues, festivals, webzines etc., managing your forum or website, running merchandize sales for you at shows and more.

Who should you recruit to be part of this team? You should look for people who love your music, have flexible schedules, can speak enthusiastically and credibly about your music, and are eager to get more involved with your work. In his popular book “The Tipping Point”(Little Brown, 2000) Malcolm Gladwell talks about connectors—people who, “know everyone...and have a truly extraordinary knack for making friends and acquaintances.” Think about who the “connectors” in your audience are—if approached correctly, they will help introduce you to new fans, spread the word about your upcoming performances, and connect you with potential collaborators or supporters. In return for their time and effort you can offer members street team a wide variety of rewards: free tickets to your shows, advance copies of your new recordings, special “invite only” shows.

Another great way to get your audience involved is by inviting them to share in your creative process. You can encourage them to submit art work for you next album, T-shirt, logo or posters. They can create videos for your songs, or record a cover of one of your pieces. You can post a poll for what song to record as a one-off single, what piece to learn next, or who your next opening band should be. Once you start thinking in these terms, you will come up with ideas that best reflect your artistic personality and process.

Last but not least, explore opportunities to present shows in private venues. This can be a house concert, loft show, or basement party. It can be indoors or outdoors, open to the public or reserved for a short “invitation only” list of supporters. Private venues create a special, community-oriented atmosphere that will encourage fans and supporters to connect with you and one another. When you encourage people to get involved and apply their creativity to your work, you are not only creating an engaged audience, you are creating a community.

Hiring a Publicist

Hiring a professional publicist to promote your music is another important step in developing your audience. The upside of working with a publicist is that it leaves you with more time to focus on your music, and gives you access to their established connections, knowledge-base, and experience. The downside is usually the cost and sometimes loss of creative control over your promotional image. For more detailed information on hiring a publicist, please see our “Publicity for Musicians” handout.

Strategic Partnerships

A common way for fans to learn about new artists is through presenters, organizations, businesses or artists that they already know and trust. Strategic partnerships with ensembles, organizations or businesses that engage your target audience but aren't direct competitors can be extremely valuable. Some examples include playing at farmers markets, book signings, art galleries, street fairs, micro breweries or restaurants. These high traffic events or establishments can put you in contact with people who you might have no other way of reaching online or through regular performances. You can also seek out opportunities to perform as an ‘opening act’ for a more established ensemble or artist. This is a great

way to get in front of new fans that are already pre-disposed to liking your music. These kinds of partnerships can help bolster the ‘word-of-mouth’ effect that is so crucial to growing your audience.

The Snowball Effect

While these strategies are most effective when done in tandem, don’t feel compelled to take them all on at once. Start with what comes most naturally, and do that well. Once these initial efforts become a manageable part of your routine, challenge yourself to add a new project or campaign. Audience development is cumulative—small, sustained efforts over time will yield surprising results. Connecting with new audience members can be challenging and fun—it requires the same kind of creativity and dedication you bring to your music.

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