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Advance Corporate Objectives & Strategies

The pARTnership Movement

Businesses can use the arts to communicate key messages to consumers, employees, and other target audiences

By Aaron Dalton





Pomegranate Center led the transformation of an unused outdoor space at a library in Mercer Island, WA into a 'Learning Garden' that connects children with nature and features an intimate performance space. Photo by Tim Matsui.

THE BIG IDEA

Arts partnerships frequently offer companies effective and cost-efficient methods of achieving critical business goals. Americans for the Arts is producing a series of essays that explore and illustrate the different types of benefits that arts partnerships can bring to your company. This essay makes the case that organizations can use arts partnerships as a channel through which they can communicate important messages to customers, employees, and other stakeholders.

Sometimes those messages are straight-forward. For instance, a clothing company may want to convince consumers that its jeans are sexier and more durable than the ones made by its competitors. Sometimes the goals are more complex. For example, a health insurance company might want to convince its members and the public at large to adopt healthier lifestyles.

No matter what sort of message you are trying to communicate, you face one major challenge that gets more difficult with each passing year: How can you cut through the clutter and make yourself heard above the roar of competing messages bombarding audiences from every direction?

“Music...can name the unnameable and communicate the unknowable.”

Leonard Bernstein (1918-1990), Music Director of the New York Philharmonic, composer (West Side Story), conductor, pianist

In 2012, the BBC accurately called our era “the age of information overload.” Analysts at ABI Research predicted that [total global mobile data traffic in 2013 would reach 23 million terabytes](#) (each terabyte itself represents one trillion bytes of data).

To grow a business and attract new customers, your message must stand out. You need to communicate in a way that is catchy, memorable, and accessible. You have to create a message that people will listen to or even seek out rather than avoid. The arts—visual arts, music, dance, theater, and film—can play an important role in helping you reach your audience and make your message unforgettable.

That is what happened when Nike released its 2012 TV spot “My Time Is Now” during the 2012 Champions League final of European club football. The advertisement was so creative and artfully presented that within 24 hours it had accumulated [7 million views on YouTube](#).

The idea that art can be used not only to entertain, but also to communicate specific ideas has been demonstrated effectively by educational children’s television shows. [Numerous studies](#) over the years have shown that children who watched Sesame Street programming outperformed their peers in terms of letter-recognition and had more positive attitudes toward school. For example, a 1990s study of adolescents who had watched Sesame Street regularly as preschoolers found that they outperformed their peers in English, math, and science.

But even if you believe that Big Bird can teach children about math or that soccer stars can sell sportswear, how does that apply to using art in the real world to solve your business problems or communicate with your audiences? Here are two examples showing that you don’t need Jim Henson’s puppetry or a Super Bowl advertising budget to build arts-business partnerships that communicate core strategic messages and get results.

THE SUPPORTING DATA

IN THE FUTURE, WE’LL FIND OURSELVES SNOWED
UNDER AN EVEN HEAVIER BLIZZARD OF DATA.

ABI RESEARCH RECENTLY PREDICTED

THAT THE AVERAGE MONTHLY DATA CONSUMED
PER WIRELESS SUBSCRIBER WILL INCREASE FROM

445

MEGABYTES IN 2014 TO

2,289

MEGABYTES BY 2019.



In June 2012, more than 300 volunteers worked under the guidance of Pomegranate Center to build a Gathering Place in Tuscaloosa, AL by repurposing debris from a devastating tornado that had hit the city the year before. Photos by Tim Matsui.

THE THEORY IN ACTION

Case #1: Green Mountain Coffee Roasters + Pomegranate Center: Building Community Spirit

On April 27, 2011, a massive tornado with sustained winds near 190 mph ripped through the city of Tuscaloosa, AL, carving a path of devastation 1.5 miles wide. The tornado killed 40 people in the city of Tuscaloosa and caused an estimated \$75 million or more in damage to property and infrastructure.

A little over a year later, in June 2012, more than 300 volunteers joined together to build a [Gathering Place](#) in a suburb of Tuscaloosa called Alberta City that had been devastated by the tornado. The volunteers worked together to make a beautiful and functional community space using debris that the storm had left behind. Broken trees were cut and fitted into I-beams fabricated from salvaged twisted metal. Seats were built from pads of broken concrete.

These volunteers worked with the guidance of a nonprofit community-building organization called [Pomegranate Center](#) using funding (and some volunteer labor) provided by Green Mountain Coffee Roasters. Pomegranate Center's work is based on the premise that community-based art is the most effective and productive way to create social change.

What exactly is a ‘Gathering Place’? And why would Pomegranate Center (based outside of Seattle) and Green Mountain Coffee Roasters (headquartered in Waterbury, VT) end up building a Gathering Place in Alabama?

Pomegranate Center describes Gathering Places as being akin to Italian piazzas or Mexican zócalos—“public places filled with activity and vibrancy.” No two Gathering Places are exactly alike, because Pomegranate Center works hand-in-hand with the residents of the communities to conceive, design, and build the Gathering Places to reflect a community’s needs.

“By words, a man transmits his thoughts to another, by means of art he transmits his feelings.”

*Leo Tolstoy
(1828-1910), author
of War and Peace
and Anna Karenina*

The Pomegranate Center is the brainchild of Milenko Matanovic, who started out as an avant-garde artist in Slovenia. “Our specialty is serving the community’s vision,” explains Matanovic. “We convene a community engagement process and ask the people to identify activities, elements, and values for their town or neighborhood center. We then serve their vision with our design expertise and finally join forces with the community to build the Gathering Place in the collaborative and participative spirit of a barn-raising. We believe that every neighborhood needs community spaces—places intentionally designed to foster the sorts of unintentional encounters that allow people to develop comfort with one another and boost the safety of the whole community.”

Unlike many modern parks that serve one purpose and one type of person (e.g., playgrounds for children or sports fields for athletes), Pomegranate Center’s Gathering Places are designed to appeal to all ages and to enable a wide range of activities—from individual personal enjoyment to small community events like weddings, birthday parties, or musical performances. Therefore a Gathering Place might include a shelter, a stage with seating, natural play areas for children, walking paths, canopies, paved spaces, landscaped plantings, and open grassy areas.

Volunteers from the community and beyond work alongside Pomegranate Center staffers to construct the Gathering Place by hand, integrating art into every element of the space. Wooden shelter columns are carved with designs that reflect local culture, concrete is scored and painted, columns are laid with mosaic, and all of this art is made using techniques and patterns that are beautiful, yet simple enough for novices without any prior artistic training to create. Each task is led by an experienced artist who teaches basic art skills to the volunteers to ensure high-quality work, thus enabling both community ownership and artistic excellence.

Pomegranate Center has developed a method that allows it to execute these projects quickly and efficiently—usually no more than four or five months pass between the first community meeting and the build. This is done intentionally to keep the same group of people engaged from the beginning to end, to take them on a journey where they can see their ideas take shape quickly.



Approximately 65 volunteers—including a dozen from GMCR's local roasting facility—helped Pomegranate Center transform an empty alleyway in Sumner, WA into a Gathering Place with benches, planters, gateways, and a stage with backdrop banners. Photos by Tim Matsui.

“Deep down everyone wants to be an artist,” says Matanovic. “The basic idea is that when people participate in the project by offering ideas and work, the ownership increases. They are inclined to guard their Gathering Place because they created it. After we installed one of our Gathering Places in Walla Walla in eastern Washington in 2008 [before the GMCR partnership began], 911 calls from that neighborhood dropped 40 percent and stayed there afterwards. During the course of the project journey, neighbors get to know and appreciate each other better, which builds trust and social capital.”

Pomegranate Center has built more than 50 Gathering Places over the years. According to Matanovic, many of these places have become local institutions that host events, festivals, and personal and public celebrations year after year.

In 2009, Karen Yacos was working as Director of Community Outreach for Green Mountain Coffee Roasters (GMCR). That same year, GMCR completed the acquisition of the Tully's Coffee® brand and wholesale coffee business.

GMCR was developing “signature causes” for some of its main coffee brands (e.g., a connection between Green Mountain Coffee and Fair Trade business practices). With the acquisition of Tully's, Yacos needed to find a cause that would resonate with Tully's identity as a provider of high-quality, slow-roasted, carefully prepared coffee that was intended to cause people to slow down and enjoy the coffee-drinking experience. “We wanted to communicate a strategic message that aligned with the idea of bringing people together—whether to share a cup of coffee or to make the world a better place,” says Yacos.

In the midst of this cause-identification process, Yacos was on a trip to Tully's roasting and packaging facility in Sumner, WA when she heard about the Pomengranate Center. It sounded like it might be a good fit with the Tully's brand.

Yacos met with Matanovic and was impressed by his energy and enthusiasm. By 2011, GMCR and Pomegranate Center had agreed to collaborate on creating four Gathering Places in the Seattle region. Yacos was pleased that the collaboration with Pomegranate Center would give some GMCR employees a chance to volunteer and participate in a hands-on way. "The DNA of GMCR was very much about giving back to communities. As a sign of a commitment to doing business that way, all employees were given 52 paid hours per year to volunteer during regular work hours," says Yacos. "Sometimes they volunteered as individuals, sometimes they would team up on a project like a river clean-up event."

In this case, Yacos and several other GMCR employees made the trip from Vermont to Seattle to help Pomegranate Center build the four Gathering Places. They were joined by additional GMCR employees based in the Seattle area. "I'm actually a land-use planner by training and I have done lots of community work, but I have to say that Pomegranate Center has a pretty amazing process in place to build one of these Gathering Places in just a week," says Yacos. "It was kind of magical to see it all come together."

The four Seattle projects were a big success. They were embraced by their communities, they created camaraderie and pride among the GMCR employees who participated in the build, and they gave GMCR a way to send a message to coffee drinkers everywhere that Tully's coffee supported communities.

GMCR publicized its work with Pomegranate Center through social media, relying mainly on Facebook and Twitter to get the word out. "This was almost entirely a social media campaign," says Yacos. "The people at the build sites would take photos, the social media team would post them and get dialog going with consumers. Not only was this a lower-cost way of engaging the public than traditional advertising, but it encouraged a two-way conversation, which is really what we were seeking."

Based on the enthusiastic response both within and outside the company, GMCR decided to build an additional Gathering Place with Pomegranate Center. Using social media, GMCR reached out to Tully's consumers and asked them to explain why their town could use a Gathering Place built by Pomegranate Center. Of all the replies that came in, the most compelling was from a woman named Kimberly in Tuscaloosa. Her town had just been devastated by the tornado and needed something to offer the hope of recovery.

"We were just driven to help," says Yacos. "A lot of our employees wanted to go down and work on the Tuscaloosa project. It was hard because of the distance, but we did have a team of people who took turns helping out over the course of the week."



In Tuscaloosa, Yacos was interviewed by television channels and newspapers. *The Tuscaloosa News* provided positive coverage (“Tornado debris gets new life – Volunteers help build Alberta Gathering Place,” June 10, 2012) that highlighted Tully’s role in the project. GMCR’s social media team made sure to post videos and other updates so that Tully’s fans could watch the Gathering Place come to life before their eyes.

But the most satisfying reaction was from the people in Tuscaloosa. “The community had picked a site for the project that was right where the tornado had gone through,” explains Yacos. “The people there were so appreciative and showed such gratitude to have this Gathering Place as a symbol for the rejuvenation of their community.”

Yacos agrees with Matanovic that the artistic component of the Gathering Places was a key part of the whole experience. “When the project was complete, we had made something that was truly a work of art,” says Yacos. “That fit with the messages we wanted to send about Tully’s being an artisanal product. The marketing people were happy, because we gave them great material.”

The partnership with Pomegranate Center did not just help GMCR communicate its message of community support to customers—the company’s employees got the message, too. Yacos says that annual internal surveys showed that many employees were interested in GMCR’s corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities, and the company enjoyed relatively high retention and low turnover rates for its industry.

“Our employees told us that they were proud of the fact that we gave back to the community,” says Yacos. “I think they felt good knowing we looked for ways to do this—whether in terms of sustainability, our Fair Trade commitment, or working with an

Left: Benches made using salvaged bicycle wheels can be arranged to create an image of wings at the Hunter Farm Gathering Place in Seattle.

Right, top: Salvaged wood installed onto I-beams made from salvaged metal at the Alberta Gathering Place in Tuscaloosa, AL.

Right, bottom: Inaugurating 132nd Square Park in Kirkland, WA, which Pomegranate Center developed in partnership with GMCR and the City of Kirkland.

All photos by Tim Matsui

arts organization like the Pomegranate Center to build beautiful places for communities to come together.”

In 2012, GMCR gave Pomegranate Center another grant to ‘scale-up’ its effectiveness. The Center now trains individuals and organizations to create Gathering Places. The training uses both educational time and hands-on projects to distill Matanovic’s 28 years of experience in creative methods for community engagement. Thus far, the Center has trained more than 150 individuals in Washington State, California, and New Zealand and is offering consultations to government agencies and nonprofits.

Case #2: Kaiser Permanente’s Educational Theatre Program (ETP)

Kaiser Permanente—a California-based, nonprofit health plan that serves [more than 10 million members](#) from Hawaii to the East Coast—has a mission to go beyond protecting the health of its members to bolster the health of entire communities in which it operates.

To achieve this larger goal, Kaiser Permanente deploys a range of initiatives, including its [Educational Theatre Program \(ETP\)](#) that seeks to model positive behaviors and healthy decision-making through the medium of theater.

Started in Hawaii in the early 1980s, ETP has since spread throughout the entire organization. In fact, each Kaiser Permanente region runs its own ETP. The regions typically hire actor-educators as employees (either full-time or on contract) to create and perform educational plays for children and adolescents.

In 2004, one region decided to try something a little different. At that time, Nancy Stevens became the Director of Community Benefit for Kaiser Permanente’s Northwest region. She inherited a dormant ETP program that she was determined to reinvigorate, but she did not know quite where to begin. “Since my background is in public health, not in theater or the arts, I was not comfortable rebuilding an internal theater program from scratch,” she recalls.

So Stevens began speaking with the folks who had started the Northwest version of the program more than 15 years earlier. One of the people she interviewed was Stan Foote, who was one of the original actors in the Northwest’s ETP. By 2004, Foote had moved on to become artistic director at [Oregon Children’s Theatre \(OCT\)](#), a respected local institution that reaches more than 75,000 schoolchildren a year through its professional productions. OCT also had experience working with educators to incorporate ideas from its plays into classroom instruction, as well as visiting schools to help students achieve state benchmarks in public speaking.

Stevens asked Foote if he would visit some of Kaiser Permanente’s other regions to glean information on best practices and recommend how to rebuild the program in the Northwest. As Foote visited these regions, he realized that an OCT-Kaiser Permanente



partnership might be the best way to give Stevens the results she was seeking. “Nancy wanted to hit the ground running and get the program started quickly,” he says. “We already had artists on staff. We knew playwrights. We had the ability to figure out how to get a high-quality show ready to perform in a short period of time. Rather than lose time trying to revitalize the theater program within the framework of a large organization, the advantages that come from being a small, nimble arts organization allowed us to get a show into schools within nine months of signing a contract with Kaiser Permanente.”

Looking back now, Stevens feels that forging the OCT partnership was one of her best decisions. “It was such an enormous asset for us to have a proven partner with visibility and a strong reputation in the community,” she notes. “OCT brought incredible expertise that helped us modernize our productions and develop the kinds of shows we needed to help us reach our goal of teaching children about healthy lifestyles.”

When ETP began in the early 1980s, it educated children on a wide range of concepts from avoiding drugs and alcohol to anger management. More recently, Kaiser Permanente decided to focus ETP’s efforts on obesity prevention. “In the early 2000s, obesity was just starting to become recognized as a major health problem,” says Stevens. “Children and parents do not generally come to the doctor to discuss issues like obesity or bullying. To have a major public health impact, we had to get into the community and find other ways like theater to reach our audience.”

In 2009, Kaiser Permanente conducted a nationwide survey to measure the results of ETP productions that tried to communicate messages on Healthy Eating Active Living (HEAL) to audiences of third- and fourth-grade children.

Colorado ETP’s college interns tackle the obesity crisis with the play, *Health Team 4*. Photo by Ricardo Casillas

The survey found that seeing a HEAL-related play led to dramatic improvements in the percentage of children who knew that they should ideally get at least 60 minutes of physical exercise per day and that they should eat five or more daily servings of fruit and vegetables.

“There is lots of evidence that children—and adults—have multiple learning styles,” says Marci Crowson, an OCT staff member who serves as artistic director for the Northwest ETP program. “Theater is a great unifier that is accessible to all kinds of learners. I used to think of theater just in terms of its entertainment value, but now the educational impact of our shows is really clear to me.”

As in any good partnership, Kaiser Permanente and OCT both derive multiple benefits from their ETP collaboration. Kaiser Permanente gets its key messages across to a receptive target audience. Beyond teaching the HEAL message, other ETP plays have focused on a variety of community health issues such as bullying and cyberbullying, peer pressure, and the appropriate use of technology. In a number of cases, OCT has worked with Kaiser Permanente to create original productions that can be shared across all Kaiser Permanente’s regions. On the flip side, some of the time the Northwest region borrows plays that have been developed by other Kaiser Permanente regions and mounts them in the Northwest.

What does OCT get from the partnership? It gets the resources to hire five full-time actors as teaching artists. It gets the morale boost that comes from using its theatrical skills to promote the public good. And it gets visibility and access to audiences that it might otherwise lack. OCT visits approximately 175 schools each year and has reached a cumulative audience of more than 270,000 students and families with its health-focused productions since it began offering its ETP programming.

“Increasingly, we live in an age where schools have less funding for the buses and tickets to take children on theatrical field trips,” explains Crowson. “By working through the ETP to visit the schools, we have been able to reach audiences that can no longer come to us. It allows us to build bridges with schools and make sure that art is still a part of these children’s lives.”

Beyond its touring productions, the ETP Northwest program has expanded dramatically in recent years. OCT now runs intensive artist-in-residence programs in which its actor-educators are embedded in classrooms—teaching, creating productions with students, and directing performance by students, for students. “The program is innovative in large part because we use a variety of tools to truly meet the needs of our communities,” says Crowson.

Not every Kaiser Permanente region partners with an outside theater company to produce educational theater productions. In fact, OCT and the Northwest region are the



Left: ACTion Lab: 2012.
Photo by Pat Moran.

Right: "IF" 2007.
Photo by Marcella Crowson.

exception to the rule. In most regions, Kaiser Permanente runs the ETP internally and hires actors directly to perform in schools.

But several of these other regions are experimenting with their own pilot programs around delivering ETP content in new and interesting ways. In the Colorado region, for example, Kaiser Permanente works with students at Metro State University, directing and coaching college actors to perform an educational theater production. These performing arts students are considered interns and receive both a stipend and course credit. They rehearse the production for the first part of the school year and then tour from mid-autumn through May, performing at schools along the Front Range of the Rocky Mountains from Pueblo to Fort Collins.

“Our productions are interactive, especially the Choose Your Life production which uses a game show scenario to teach students how to make positive choices when faced with bullying situations,” says Curtis Robbins, manager of youth health and educational theatre programs for Kaiser Permanente Colorado. “We tried to see if events of harassment or violence diminished in schools where the bullying prevention program was brought in, and we did ultimately discover that incidents of bullying and harassment had decreased over the long-term in at least three of the schools where our actors had performed Choose Your Life. We do get a lot of qualitative feedback from audiences and schools that the theater productions do have success in promoting a culture of caring and encouraging empathetic behavior in the student body.”



Left: "The Pressure Point" 2013. Photo by Pat Moran.

Right: "The Pressure Point" 2008. Photo by Owen Carey.



Robbins says that theater has proven its value in helping Kaiser Permanente promote physical and mental health in the communities the company serves. "Artists see value in communicating information not just to the head, but also to the heart and the muscles," he explains. "Communication on health topics often stays on an intellectual level that is just not fun, especially for young children. Theater has a natural ability to take these topics and make them fun."

What is the business case for Kaiser Permanente to invest in ETP? Amy Tulenson, who formerly ran the ETP for Kaiser Permanente in Ohio, explains that Kaiser Permanente's core mission is to provide high-quality affordable healthcare to improve the health of its members and also the communities it serves. She says that Kaiser Permanente does not look at ETP as a marketing initiative, but rather as a way of providing an additional benefit to its communities. By using this creative and unique method of communicating healthful messages to children, she notes that Kaiser Permanente not only seeks to keep children healthy, but also hopes that the children will take some of the messages they learn in the Educational Theatre Program back to their families and thus disseminate these healthy lifestyle choices, ultimately strengthening their entire communities.

Of course, the ETP could yield financial benefits for Kaiser Permanente. To the extent that the Educational Theatre Program can encourage healthful behaviors that reduce the prevalence of chronic health problems, it could also help keep healthcare costs under control.

THE TAKEAWAYS

Kaiser Permanente's Educational Theater Program (ETP) and GMCR's collaboration with Pomegranate Center demonstrate that the arts can be a versatile and effective way to communicate key messages to a target audience.

Whether you are trying to change behaviors or tell an audience what your company stands for, the arts can help you get those messages across loud and clear in a way that has a lasting impact by appealing not just to the intellect, but also to emotions—not just to the head, but also to the heart.

“It doesn't matter how the paint is put on, as long as something is said.”

*Jackson Pollock
(1912-1956), artist*

THE QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

How to use artistic partnerships to communicate *your* key messages:

- What are some of the highest-priority messages you want to communicate to your audience?
- Which of these messages are you already communicating successfully? What metrics are you using to track the success of your existing communications campaigns?
- Which of these messages are not getting through to your audience?
- What message would you want an artist or arts organization to tell your audience and how would you want the message delivered?
- How can you find an artist or arts company willing, able, and eager to help you tell that message?
- Consider how you can partner with artists and arts organizations for their creativity and for their ability to tell a story using an unconventional approach that would most likely never emerge from a focus group. Have you set guidelines or parameters for the partnership up front? How much creative freedom can you offer while still retaining some control over the message?

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