

Hannah Grannemann: It's Time to Level Up

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By: Hannah Grannemann

Call it a silver lining. More people are watching and participating in arts content online than they did pre-pandemic. But I fear that arts organizations will pass on the opportunity to “level up” and keep this new online audience as they move back to in-person events over the next year.

In her 2016 book *The Art of Relevance*, Nina Simon writes (building on research from Deirdre Wilson and Dan Sperber), that a person evaluates relevance of information on two factors: 1) the potential for the information to “yield new conclusions that matter to you” (positive cognitive effect) and 2) the effort in getting that information not being too high. Simon extends the idea to arts and cultural experiences, hence its appearance here on a blog for live entertainment professionals.

Simon crafts a powerful, evocative metaphor, describing how people hold keys created from parts of their identity. Arts organizations are rooms with doors that have keyholes, where keyholes are relevant to what is inside rooms, where arts experiences live. She asks the reader to reflect: how many keyholes does your door have that fit different keys? How many doors does your room have?

The metaphor works because it taps into the core values of arts workers: we want our organizations to be open and welcoming. We want everyone to find just the right keyhole for them. We want their keys to fit and for them to find themselves in a room where they are valued. We don't want to lock anyone out.

We find ourselves in the COVID-19 pandemic where – surprisingly, shockingly – more people see the arts as relevant to their everyday life. Arts organizations are seeing a huge increase in participation. One-third to more than half of the people participating in online programs of arts organizations never visited that organization in person (according to the Slover Linett/LaPlaca Cohen report [Culture + Community in Crisis](#)). What arts leaders, fans, and advocates had been saying for decades was coming true before our eyes: people will love it if they just experience it.

Which lever of the relevance formula was pulled: did the arts start putting out arts experiences that mattered to more people? Or was the effort it takes to get the relevant information lowered?

Clearly, we lowered the effort. By a lot. Arts organizations didn't change the content that much, they changed how it was delivered.

We put a lot more work online. We lowered the price or made it free. No one had to leave their house – or even their couch – to see theater, dance, music. No one had to park a car or get a babysitter. Of course, we also had different external circumstances: people are at home more. BUT competition for entertainment time

at home increased fast and we lost many marketing outlets, so maybe that's a wash.

This change in delivery is a big change, and worth keeping.

I don't mean to make it sound like any of this was easy – it wasn't. But let's change the frame from before/after, and loss/gain.

Let's say instead: It's time to level up. A "Both/And" strategy of in-person AND digital delivery will be the strongest strategy and business model upon return. As the pandemic has stretched past a year and the arts has moved beyond emergency mode, confidence in delivering logistically and financially viable digital programs is increasing. It's clear that adding digital delivery doesn't undercut the value of live performance. It has FELT good from the beginning to have more people watching. But it's been a mixed feeling because it feels like admitting that live performance isn't the "best" way to experience it. The argument that live is "best" or that the art form only exists live has been the backbone of our raison d'être as we market our experience, apply for funding, and advocate for the arts industry. That's hard to let go. But now we know that we can (and our audience can, and our funders can) live in a "Both/And" world where people participate in-person and/or digitally.

We added so many keyholes to the doors to our rooms in the past year. Taking them away would be a mistake.

My advice for arts organizations: Use the rest of this stay-at-home time to maximize your digital audience and get to know them. Consider them an additional constituency to your in-person audience. Do this and you'll come out of this crisis with stronger fundamentals than when it started: namely, a larger audience base. For the arts industry: this explosion in online audiences could be the key to the increased respect needed for a level up in funding and influence. More regular people participating in the arts on a regular basis, seeing it as relevant and integral to their lives is key to public policy objectives.

The beautiful noise of jangling keys of all the people in our newly designed rooms is loud. Let's level up so we can keep our rooms full.

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Hannah joined us for [episode 26](#) of the [Unobstructed](#) podcast. Listen to the full episode: