

THE LOYALTY TARGET

August 2018



Curious
THEATRE
COMPANY

no guts, no **story**

Denver, Colorado



THE LOYALTY TARGET

HOW PUTTING PATRONS
AT THE CENTER
HELPED CURIOUS THEATRE COMPANY
REIMAGINE TRADITIONAL ARTS
ADMINISTRATION STRUCTURES:
LEADING TO A MORE DIVERSE AUDIENCE,
INCREASED PATRON-DRIVEN REVENUE,
AND GREATER
PATRON SATISFACTION.

Table of Contents

Summary	4
Background	4
The Model	5
Staff Roles	6
Increasing Efficiency	6
Patrons are People	7
Storytelling Works	7
The Patron Experience is Everything	8
Give the People What They Want – Engagement Activities	9
Audience Diversification	10
Building Authentic Relationships	10
E-Community: Amplifying with Social Media	11
Bringing Art into the Community	11
Onward	12

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Summary

Curious Theatre Company is two years into an organizational transformation. We have made investments in the patron experience, our external messaging, and our administrative structure and team; and now, we see those changes driving our organization forward in all areas.

In 2016, we were awarded a two-year Arts Innovation Fund grant from the Bonfils-Stanton Foundation to support our new administrative functions, coined THE LOYALTY TARGET. This change has led to noted improvements in the following areas: the patron service experience, patron-driven revenue, diversification across all organizational facets, and increased community outreach/community partnerships. It has also led to a deepened organizational commitment to our renewed Core Values and more alignment between our artistic work and messaging. Those improvements have translated into these tangible impacts:



Tripled percentage of audience that identify as people of color



Grew patron-driven revenue from 57% to 67%



95% of patrons report good or excellent customer service



106% increase in fiscal year end appeal revenue



63% of donors less than \$100 increased their giving



145% increase in subscribers-that-give



15.6% increase in subscription revenue

Background

In 2015, Curious found itself in need of radical change. We had inconsistent records, little historical data, and no training on customer service; each staff member was operating entirely independently and felt unsupported and isolated. Moreover, this was translating to patrons. Our most valued donors weren't receiving information, emails from different departments were going out to patrons on the same day, and the messaging had become stale across the board. All this meant that income and patron numbers were down – way down.

Katie Maltais joined the team as the Managing Director and developed THE LOYALTY TARGET as a way to put patrons at the center of the organization and disrupt the “business as usual” atrophy. The Bonfils-Stanton Foundation saw the potential of the plan and supported a two-year incubator period to test and track THE LOYALTY TARGET. Beginning with the 2016-17 Season, the plan was fully implemented.

—
OUR ULTIMATE GOAL
IS TO HAVE
A SUBSTANTIAL
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CALL CURIOUS
THEIR CULTURAL HOME.
—

Curious has a unique role in Denver. Mission-bound to engage the community in important contemporary issues through provocative modern theatre, we take our role seriously within the market. *We think of ourselves as a social justice organization whose platform is theatre.* The type of work we do is inherently risky and relies on a solid base of support from a wide cross-section of donors and subscribers to ensure stable and sustainable revenue. Because of this, **our ultimate goal is to have a substantial prominence of patrons call Curious their Cultural Home.**

The Model

In the traditional model of an arts organization, a patron climbs steps of loyalty defined entirely by financial contribution, going from a single ticket buyer to a subscriber to a donor and, ultimately, a major donor. Many people get “stuck”, however, because they do not have capacity to give at the next level. We hold the belief that these people are still valuable to Curious and can equally grow loyalty through non-monetary ways; valuing patrons solely on revenue does not live within our mission. *So we developed a new model – THE LOYALTY TARGET.*

THE LOYALTY TARGET looks like a bullseye with the centerpoint being “Curious is my cultural home.” We will always have people at various points on the spectrum, from folks that have never heard of us to our biggest advocates and supporters at the center. The intention is to drive people further to the center with each interaction, increasing those that view Curious as their Cultural Home and are therefore invested in our success.

There are three forces that drive people to the center.



Staff Roles

In order to fully execute this model's vision, staff roles needed to change. As in many organizations, Curious had "silos" of marketing and development, each vying for the same dollars from the same people, stuck in a competitive mindset. THE LOYALTY TARGET demanded that we break down that convention and rebuild. There is no "marketing director" or "development director" at Curious – instead, there is a team that overlaps and integrates in unique ways. *Having a tightly interwoven team structure is vital to the success of THE LOYALTY TARGET.*

The team responsible for the implementation and testing of THE LOYALTY TARGET became known as the Arrows. Each member of the team oversees specific projects and initiatives while simultaneously supporting the others in tactical ways.

- Managing Director Katie Maltais leads strategy and messaging, budget, and major donors.
- Patron Development Manager Maggie Schlundt oversees individual donor campaigns, recognition, and events as well as foundation and government grants.
- Community Engagement Organizer Jeannene Bragg's time is split into thirds: external outreach (particularly in the social justice community), content creation, and supporting other initiatives, like our education programs.
- Patron Services Manager Emily Whalen is responsible for the front of house staff as well as research and reports.

All members of the Arrows support other members by tackling specific projects, brainstorming solutions, and working collaboratively. One key requirement of the team is that every member is an active storyteller and content creator (more on that later).



How this works - an example.

Example 1

Jeannene leads our work on social justice and Maggie oversees grants. In most organizations, Maggie would write all the grants, perhaps asking other departments for facts or data to support a narrative she crafts. At Curious, when we applied for a grant that centered on social justice, Jeannene wrote the narrative. This ensured that the voice was authentic and accurate, speaking directly to the social justice community and drawing connections to Curious. Maggie was responsible for editing, gathering attachments, and ensuring the grant was submitted.

Example 2

Jeannene is responsible for social media, but Twitter was something that was taking a fair amount of time and effort for very little results. We considered shutting down the Curious account, but Emily (who is in charge of front of house) stepped in and shared that she loves Twitter as it is her social media platform of choice. So Emily began overseeing our Twitter account. Because she is very familiar with how Twitter works, Emily can respond quickly to the ever-changing flow of Twitter. Our voice became more authentic and of-the-moment rather than scheduled weeks in advance. Jeannene bought back more time and Emily found a part of her job that was creative and fulfilling.

Increasing Efficiency

In the nonprofit world, efficiency is especially vital. During this two-year period, we took every opportunity to discover and invest in ways we could become more efficient. Buying back time so our staff was able to focus on more creative or strategic endeavors was a key focus of our team.



How this works - an example.

A glaring issue for both efficiency and patron service was our ticketing system and website integration. In 2017, we migrated to Spektrix as our Customer Relations Management (CRM) system, despite hesitation that system migrations are inherently time-consuming and challenging. We now see more than 15 hours per week in time gained back by our Patron Services Manager alone through automated reports, automated reminder emails, and a more streamlined online buying process (which has led to 30% more tickets being purchased online rather than over the phone). Other staff members have also found efficiencies by having a more usable, accurate system that anyone on the team can access and an increased ability to segment and customize communication to various patron groups.

Patrons are People

When we began this process, we had an imperative to replace the annual gift level of our largest donor, who was substantially lowering their financial commitment. Our goal had been to grow our patron driven revenue (revenue traced directly to patrons, without foundations, government, rentals, etc.) to offset this decrease in funding.

At the end of fiscal year 2015 (*just before THE LOYALTY TARGET took effect*), our patron driven revenue was 57% of our total income. Today, that percentage is 67% - an additional \$83,000 in patron driven revenue annually.

This staggering improvement is the direct result of coordinated campaigns that spanned sales and fundraising.

Storytelling Works

We have seen this staff configuration – with no marketing or development silos – enable us to **cohesively speak to our patrons**. No longer does a patron receive different messaging in a fundraising versus a sales ask. Rather, patrons are treated as people we know, with messages tailored to their experiences. *We are able to reinforce patron loyalty by showing we are also loyal to the patron.*

Our patron email opt-out rates have plummeted, with more patrons choosing to receive, open, and click through emails than ever before. Our social media outlets and online traffic to blog posts have simultaneously seen exponential growth, with patrons connecting to Curious in a number of ways.

All team members have to be particularly adept at storytelling, translating Curious' mission and current campaign focus into engaging content across various mediums. We talk about Curious' mission daily and create campaigns and messaging around the mission. A clear, strong mission has enabled us to be focused in our storytelling and our voice.

Pro Tip

If everyone on staff can't recite your organization's mission, it's either too long or you're not talking about it enough. Get succinct, get clear, and get everyone onboard. The mission is the heart of your organization and should be the guidepost of every decision and every patron interaction.

Lesson Learned

During this process, Katie led an extensive effort to rewrite and have the organization recommit to new Core Values to better reflect all that we are doing as an organization. These commitments guide all that we do – our artistic, community and patron-centered work – and were developed in collaboration with all stakeholders of the organization, including the Board, Staff, and Artistic Company. Being very deliberate in not only what the core values are, but also how those values were phrased and the language used to convey them, allowed the entire Curious team to get on the same page around how we tell our story and what the voice of Curious sounds like.

While our programming remained largely consistent before and during the two-year incubator, the messaging we used to promote that programming was more direct, proclaiming Curious' place as a home for unapologetically progressive, diverse work. Our fundraising appeals became more personalized and creative, generating huge increases in giving.

Our artistic motto is “no guts, no story.” We applied that approach to our communications as well with a voice that was bold, more direct and even a bit feisty. It more accurately reflects who we are as an organization.



How this works - an example.

In June of 2016, Curious sent out a “Declaration of Independence” fundraising appeal. We rewrote the words of the Declaration to highlight the need for independent and provocative professional theatre in Denver. Donors and prospective donors received that letter and a personal call-to-action reflective of their giving history (ie: a subscriber who had never donated to Curious got a completely different ask than a donor who had already given this fiscal year).

The language and tone of the fundraising appeal was echoed in our sales emails for the show running at the time – *White Guy on the Bus* – as well as in our social media. So, while some of the messaging was intended to solicit donations and some was intended to sell tickets, it all sounded like it was of the same voice and was coordinated to ensure targeted groups received specific messages on specific days. The “story” we told from May-July 2016 was “Curious is independent. We are bold, unique, and necessary.” The tone was aggressive and declared our intention clearly, regardless of the ask we were making of the recipient.

The Declaration fundraising campaign saw a **106% increase over the prior year's income for the fiscal year-end campaign**. Personalized, coordinated storytelling, reflected through all communication channels, had an enormous effect on Curious' bottom line. The following year, we built on an additional 34% increase using the same tactics, but a different story – 20 Years of Curious. Similarly, our December 2016 campaign saw a 75% increase over the prior year and in December 2017, campaign revenue increased by another 8%.

Lesson Learned

Hiring good storytellers that are mission-focused is more important than any particular job function. When we brought on new members of the team, we thought we were looking for someone whose skills matched the job description; we were lucky that we also found people that had a great ability to translate our mission, our goals, our story into different formats (video, written articles, and social media) and for different audiences. We quickly realized this was the most vital component on the team – storytelling. Specific skills can be learned in order to fulfill a job function.

The Patron Experience is Everything

Our new model of integration has significantly impacted our ability to focus on the patron. Over the two years, we instituted customer service training for all employees that gave us a consistent vision and focus for how we view our patrons. Our team truly lives the credo that without patrons, none of us would have jobs.

Our focus is always on long-term loyalty over short-term gains.



How this works - an example.

Katie handles nearly all serious patron complaints personally. Having someone with the title Managing Director return your email shows that the theatre is taking your issue seriously. In 2016, a patron was very disappointed by one of our productions and wanted his subscription refunded. The man had been a subscriber for many years so the issue was elevated to Katie. Katie called and spoke with the man to understand his concerns and frustrations. She agreed to refund his subscription and asked if he would attend the next show as her guest because she suspected he would enjoy the production and remember why he was a subscriber for so long. He did attend that show and subsequently reinstated his subscription, this time with a donation. If we had said "Curious has a no refunds policy," we could have kept his \$200 subscription, but lost him as a patron forever and likely gained him as an outspoken adversary. Instead, his loyalty increased because he felt heard and cared for.

Through annual surveys distributed before, during, and after THE LOYALTY TARGET incubator period, we were able to track a number of metrics directly related to customer service, experience, and patrons' connectivity to Curious. In every area, we saw improvement over the two years. The largest change was around customer service - *more than 95% of patrons reported "good" or "excellent" service from our team over the last year.* We also saw increases around how valuable patrons found our content (playbills, online resources, emails, etc.) and how personalized they found their Curious experience.

Pro Tip

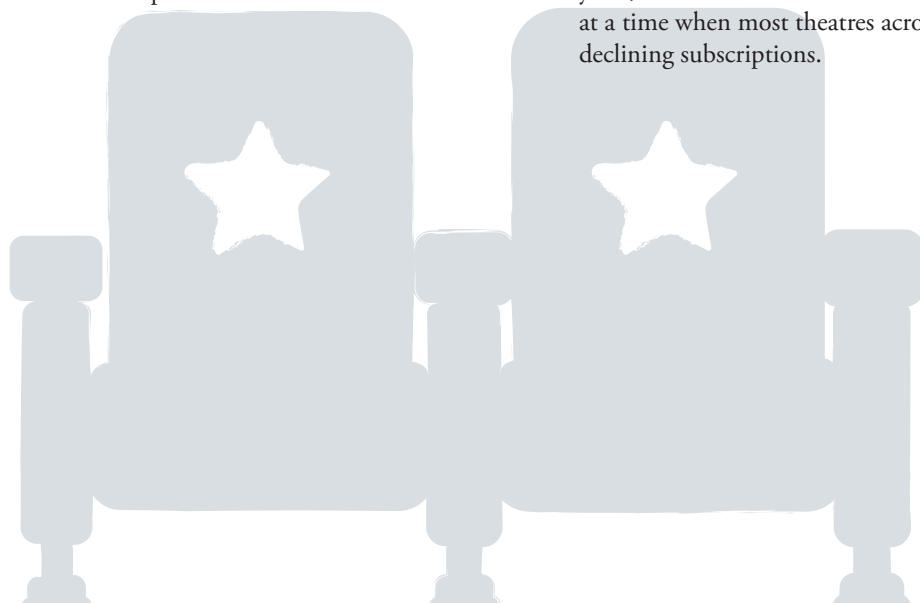
Katie's mantra is "treat everyone as you want your grandma treated." When we say "as you want to be treated" employees often reply that they wouldn't mind if someone did XYZ. However, when we instead consider how we would want a person of whom we are protective treated, the mind shifts to being only the very best, because that's what Grandma (or partner or child or sibling or whomever) deserves. It doesn't mean you give them whatever they want, but it does mean the utmost respect and go-out-of-your-way attitude.

This shift felt completely natural to patrons. In one-on-one interviews with new and increased donors, none of them could point to a change that inspired their increased giving. Instead, they would say things like "I just felt more connected to the organization" and "Curious became a higher priority for me." When pressed, most cited things like notes on seats or cultivation events that made them feel more important and thus made them more loyal. In one case, a donor that was giving at a \$200 level for years jumped to \$1,000, but couldn't articulate why. After talking through it, she realized she felt cared for and like her contribution would really help Curious.

Lesson Learned

Personal touches matter more than we ever imagined. In nearly every one-on-one interview conducted with subscribers and donors, they pointed to an individual note left on their seat in the theatre as the thing that made them feel special. It was universal that these handwritten acknowledgements were one of the biggest drivers of loyalty.

During these two years, we had a strong focus on increasing our low and mid-level donor base. Throughout that time, Curious saw *63% of donors of less than \$100 annually increase their giving and had a 34% increase of donors at the \$250 and \$500 levels.* We also went from 23% of subscribers giving to 56% through a concerted effort; we used every opportunity to tell these patrons we have a 100% giving goal for subscribers. In those same two years, Curious saw an increase of 15.6% in subscription revenue at a time when most theatres across the country are seeing declining subscriptions.



Give the People What They Want – Engagement Activities

One of the key components of THE LOYALTY TARGET was increasing patron engagement. Because our mission is to engage the community in contemporary issues through provocative modern theatre, we really took that as a mandate to not only produce issue-bound theatre, but spark conversation and action around those issues.

While our audience is universally intellectually curious, they are rather diverse demographically. We serve five different generations – from iGen to Traditionalists. Each of those generations has different expectations around communication and engagement. We focused on a few key areas: in-person; show-specific auxiliary content; and engaging email and social media (discussed in prior section).

In-Person Engagement

Throughout the two years, we radically changed our model around in-person patron engagement, moving it from living with the artistic team to the administrative team. We evaluated existing programs and discontinued those that had little impact but required significant effort. Through that evaluation, we found patrons most enjoyed pre- and post-show guests rather than separate events. Because of that, our focus shifted from planning events to identifying and securing speakers and guests to augment an existing performance.

For the bulk of our twenty-year history, Curious has held talkbacks after every performance where all patrons were invited to stay and discuss the play and production with a Curious facilitator and members of the cast. This distinguishing feature was ramped-up in the 17-18 season when we refocused them into post-show discussions that are action-driven and dive into the issues that inspired the play, rather than the play itself. And in our newly patron-focused approach to all aspects of our business, we made the discussions more about community discussion than about us as experts explaining things from the stage.

Go Deeper: Show-Specific Content

For each play at Curious, there are a number of issues that are immediately relevant and actionable that the play may touch on. In 2016, we expanded our printed programs to allow for more issue-driven content in addition to bios and letters from the director-type content. This was very well received by audiences and encouraged us to explore other ways we could offer additional content without increased expense.

We began a “Go Deeper” section on each play’s webpage where patrons can access a wealth of information that can deepen their understanding of the issues explored in the play. Patrons explore this section both before and after seeing a play. We promote this section through the program itself – sometimes including a shorter version of an article or interview in the program and the full version online – and through pre- and post-show emails. The reaction to this content has been excellent, with survey patrons rating “Go Deeper” very favorably.



How this works - an example.

During the run of *Appropriate* by Branden Jacobs-Jenkins, the post-show discussions largely circled around how America can better acknowledge and reconcile our racial legacy, how that legacy is living on in America today (citing current events like the 2017 Charlottesville Unite the Right Rally), and what we can do as citizens to drive change forward. All of our discussion facilitators were trained and given materials to help them understand not only the material, but also the current landscape of racial tension, institutional racism, implicit bias, and white fragility. Guest speakers from the social justice community augmented these robust discussions frequently and these partnerships give us a tool to give our partners more visibility and our work more meaning. We provide a platform for community issues and they help us to deepen our conversations.

Our facilitators also changed the direction of the “talk backs” where our artists were placed in a position of authority answering questions from the audience to a true discussion mode, where many questions are reflected back to the audience in order for more voices to be heard. And a shift in the overall tone from “what was this piece about” to “how does this piece inform what we can do in our community.”



How this works - an example.

As part of the development of new content, we’ve teamed up with Denver Public Libraries. Their research staff reads each play in advance and develops an eclectic resource list for our audience, which includes books, articles, music, and movies. This provides us with deeper reaching content than our staff could develop alone and furthers a partnership with an important community ally.

GO DEEPER.

Audience Diversification

For us, community outreach is not a program, it's an organizational commitment to go deep into the issues affecting our community through our mission, our art, our systems, and all that we do. The term "patrons" at Curious is inclusive of all people, not simply those that already attend Curious.

For years, Curious has been a leader in our region as a theatre focused on Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) with regards to our playwrights and actors. Yet, our audience was overwhelmingly white. *Programming alone was not driving diverse audiences through our doors.* One of our primary goals through THE LOYALTY TARGET was to see more racial diversity among our audience.

Building Authentic Relationships

We took our cue from Donna Walker Kuhne (Author, *Invitation to the Party*) and invested in staff time. During the reframing of our staff, we made the conscious decision to not have a staff position dedicated to traditional marketing. Instead, we created the position of Community Engagement Organizer, which dedicates a third of this position's time to external relationship building, and hired Jeannene Bragg for the role.

Under Jeannene's leadership, Curious has demonstrated our commitment by attending conversations in community spaces, publicly supporting social justice movements, regularly attending social justice events, and offering our resources and space. We seek to not *just* engage with this community when we have a play that ties strongly to a certain segment of the social justice community, but to remain consistently engaged and informed - a part of the conversation.

We see this as a long-term investment, not a short-term sales tactic. After two years, we are beginning to see the effects this position has had on our place in the community and on Curious.

In two years, Curious has tripled the percentage of our audience that identify as people of color.

Lesson Learned

Building trust and real relationships with communities of color takes time. Investment of months or years is necessary before real results can be seen. It's worth it.

In traditional outreach models, arts organization staff often attend community meetings as a guest and make a pitch for a particular show. In our model, we attend many more diverse gatherings, many around community issues. We don't go as a guest and often are not on the agenda. We attend as a partner, we learn from the content, we offer resources and, when appropriate, we talk about our work and/or give out information about it. In this new approach, we are seen as a true participant, not someone who is there to take advantage of the gathering in order to sell something. Our partners often send out information about our shows in their notes and newsletters, not as an obligation, but because we are truly a partner in their work.



How this works - an example.

At a recent racial justice meeting, participants were going around the room talking about what was happening in the community. A participant, who did not know Jeannene or that she was present, started talking about a show she had seen at Curious and our commitment to social justice. Several others in the room, turned to Jeannene and asked her to elaborate on the work. This community endorsement was far more powerful and meaningful than any sales pitch she could make. And later the attendees made plans to come to the next Curious show as a group.

Pro Tip

Go where the community is. Go to actions and rallies. It's not about you. It's about supporting the work of the community. This is particularly important in building relationships in the racial justice and immigrant communities. Be seen as a partner at their table before you invite them into your space.

We are a learning organization, not the expert; that mentality allows us to work authentically in this space. We go to community trainings, particularly on the issues in our upcoming shows. We are willing to learn and grow as we build community partnerships. We bring information back to our teams and invite community experts into our work to advise us and take part in community conversations.





E-community: Amplifying with Social Media

An ancillary advantage of having the same person handle our Community Engagement and Social Media efforts is that we are using media to amplify our efforts and gain recognition as a social justice organization.

Some of our social media efforts with the widest reach are those where we post a news article about a current community effort that also touches on the work we are doing. These posts are more issue-based conversation starters than sales posts; they bring focus to the community we are serving, to our partners and also bring new audiences who care about those issues to our media sites.

Additionally, we often include check-ins and photos of our staff when we attend community meetings, forums, and actions, amplifying the work of our partners in Social Justice while raising our own profile at the same time.

Bringing Art into the Community

From the start of this project, we all felt the need to take our mission and our art into our community, rather than only inviting the community into our space. However, resources, logistics, and budget stood in the way. It was the nut we couldn't seem to crack. Then, in 2016, a young woman wrote a play in our Curious New Voices Summer Playwriting Intensive that got everyone talking about race in America today.

Black. by Lamaria Aminah was our opportunity to put our dream into action, filling a need within the Denver Public Schools and our community. The play, which takes place in the aftermath of the police murder of a young black man, is an excellent prompt and the issues the play raises resonated deeply with young people. We focused our efforts on the play as a conversation starter more than as theatre alone; each 20-minute play was followed by an hour of facilitated discussion. We tour to high schools, community centers, libraries, and churches.

Black. allows people to crack into tough discussions on race in a real, safe, and empathetic way. Young people of color have also told us it is very empowering for them to see actors, directors, and writers of color telling their stories on stage. This tour has made great strides in sparking conversations about racial equity in the Denver community. Once the conversation has opened about the play, we have found participants naturally begin to discuss the circumstances of their lives and communities and how they can make change.



How this works - an example.

The power of this play as an entry point for deep, activating conversations was demonstrated when we performed *Black.* at New Hope Baptist (a church with a primarily African-American congregation) and Calvary Baptist (a church with a primarily white congregation). The churches had been working together for two years on racial justice issues. After the play was performed to both congregations simultaneously, they said it resulted in the deepest, most real conversations they've had yet. It opened the discussion to real vulnerability and raw emotion that usually isn't brought forward in a multi-racial space.

Onward

The last two years have seen tremendous changes at Curious. THE LOYALTY TARGET has enabled Curious to fully live out our mission and values in ways that have translated into all areas of our theatre. Our artistic and administrative structures are now more closely aligned, allowing for greater collaboration and risk-taking as an organization. This plays out in greater responsiveness to current, urgent issues in both artistic programming (like adding *Building the Wall* into our 16-17 season in response to the Trump immigration plan) and in messaging and community leadership (like being a centerpoint for information exchange in our social justice community).

We look forward to what the future brings for Curious and feel poised for success with mounting patron loyalty and firm roots in our mission and community.

