THE WILMA THEATER AND INNOVATIVE MARKETING

how one arts organization gaps in the marketplace

Rachel Cheetham-Richard and Megan Heckert, Avencia Incorporated

CHAPTER FIVE
The Wilma Theater is one of Philadelphia’s premier arts organizations. Located on the Avenue of the Arts in Center City Philadelphia, the Wilma puts on thought-provoking productions that confront the issues of our time, from the war in Iraq to the complexities of human sexuality. The theater has a loyal following of well-educated patrons who seek intellectual stimulation, provocation, and education from their theater experience. With more than 80 theaters in the Greater Philadelphia region, however, the Wilma faces significant competition for the patronage of this rich arts and culture community. The constant need to sell more tickets, to cultivate support, and to operate a non-profit theater is very demanding.

The Wilma Theater was founded in 1973 as the Wilma Project to encourage theatrical productions of original material and the development of community artists. In 1979, Blanka and Jiri Zizka of Czechoslovakia forged a creative relationship with the Wilma Project as artists-in-residence. They gained swift acclaim for their bold productions and assumed artistic leadership, changing the name to The Wilma Theater. After 20 seasons at various locations, the Wilma opened a new state-of-the-art, 300-seat theater on The Avenue of the Arts in 1996. The Wilma’s mission remains to present theater as an art form, engaging artists and audiences in an adventure of aesthetic and philosophical reflection on the complexities of contemporary life. The Wilma’s artistic team accomplishes this mission by producing thoughtful and well-crafted productions of intelligent, daring plays that represent a range of voices, viewpoints, and production styles. Both the artistic team and executive staff strive to make their theater programs, both artistic and educational, accessible to as wide an audience as possible.

However, they must also look at the bottom line. The Wilma must always try to attract new audiences while delivering excellent shows and experiences to all of their existing patrons. To this end, in 2005 the theater embarked on a focused analysis of its core audiences. To do this, they sought to describe and understand expectations of existing audiences, identify “gaps” in the marketplace where new potential audiences for the Wilma might be found, and apply this knowledge to enhance the experience for all.

This analysis included focus group sessions with current and former subscribers, single ticket buyers, and people who do not attend Wilma productions but who do support other local arts organizations. Among the topics for discussion were: The Wilma Theater as a brand, its mission, programming and programs, and reasons for patronizing (or not). Information from these focus groups was then combined with an in-depth geographic analysis of the Wilma’s existing support base and potential areas for expansion. This study sought to determine key geographic areas of support for the theater, to identify significant demographic characteristics of those areas, and to locate new areas sharing those characteristics. The findings provided the Wilma with a detailed understanding of their current patrons and suggested ways of expanding interest for the Wilma’s programming throughout the Greater Philadelphia region.

By using new geographic methods, the Wilma was able to use intelligence about their existing supporters to identify untapped markets. More specifically, they asked where in the region were “our types” of people who had not yet been reached. This question was inherently geographic and therefore lent itself nicely to a spatial analysis of socio-demographic patterns. Indeed, organizations in many sectors are now using geographic gap analyses to assess
their impacts and guide their programs, particularly in business (Hammond, 1999), risk assessment (Allen, 2006) and conservation (Monmonier, 2006).

This geographic analysis was performed by Avencia Incorporated, a local geospatial software company, as part of their internal research and development program. This program allows employees to spend 10% of their time each month on personal research or pro bono projects. The Wilma research fit into the latter category.

THE DATA

The geographic analysis began with data already on hand at the Wilma. They collect data on subscribers, donors, and single ticket buyers as part of their regular ticketing process. Included are names, addresses, and other relevant information all stored in a single large database. The fact that they already had very clear constituencies for whom they maintained locational information greatly enhanced the feasibility of the study. Though the Wilma has a national following, this particular analysis was limited to patrons in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Delaware, and Maryland.

Using ESRI’s ArcView desktop GIS product, records for individual patrons were geocoded, with street addresses matched to their latitudinal and longitudinal coordinates. In this way, a map of patron locations could be generated and combined with a map of census tracts in order to indicate the spatial distribution of supporters and, in particular, to reveal those tracts with the largest numbers of Wilma Theater patrons. Each of three patron groups (subscribers, donors, and single ticket buyers) was mapped for each season from 2002-2003 through 2004-2005 as well as the overall period.

For a different perspective not tied to arbitrary political boundaries, density maps of Wilma supporters were also created. This involved calculating the number of patrons located within each 100 foot x 100 foot block, creating a more nuanced image than allowed by the census tract map. This was particularly helpful in enabling the Wilma to see local variation within more sparsely populated areas.
populated suburban areas where census tracts are larger and might aggregate people from disparate locations. For example, the donor maps by census tract show a large portion of the northwestern suburbs to have a high number of donors, while the density maps show much more specific areas of concentration (Figures 2 & 3).

PATRON DISTRIBUTIONS

The distribution of subscribers (Figures 4a & 4b) followed a distinct pattern with very clear hot spots. The largest concentration of subscribers is, unsurprisingly, in Center City Philadelphia. Smaller concentrations occur in University City and the northwestern neighborhoods of Germantown, Mt. Airy, and Chestnut Hill. Other areas with relatively high numbers of subscribers included the Main Line suburbs such as Bala Cynwyd, Narberth, and Ardmore as well as the northern suburbs such as Jenkintown and Elkins Park. These areas represent relatively affluent communities with relatively easy transportation to the city, either on foot or via train lines. The descriptive maps also revealed a surprising concentration of subscribers from areas
not previously believed to have high levels of support, particularly from Bucks County in Pennsylvania, Haddonfield in New Jersey, and northern Delaware.

The distribution of donors (refer back to Figures 2 & 3) followed a very similar pattern to that of subscribers: most heavily concentrated in Center City, University City, Mt. Airy, and Chestnut Hill with smaller concentrations along the Main Line and in the northern suburbs. Again mirroring the subscriber distribution, donors also had somewhat surprising concentrations in the Haddonfield and northern reaches of Bucks County.

Single ticket buyers, not surprisingly, had a much wider and diverse distribution than either of the other groups (Figure 5). The heaviest concentrations are found in the same locations as heavy subscription areas, but they cover a much more extensive area.

The Wilma’s core patrons are those who support the theater in several ways. They include repeat donors, repeat subscribers and, most importantly, those who elect to do both. The distribution of these core patrons also mirrored the subscriber and donor distributions but with particularly heavy concentrations in Center City.

GEOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS

By matching patrons to their census tracts, Avencia was able to “stamp” each supporter with the demographic characteristics of the surrounding community. These values were then summarized to develop a picture of the “average” Wilma patron’s neighborhood. This made it possible to perform a gap analysis, comparing actual areas of support to areas of similar demographic characteristics but low support, thus identifying gaps between potential and actual support for the theater.

By comparing characteristics of the population in areas of high patronage to characteristics of the region as a whole, a clearer socio-demographic picture of patron communities and neighborhoods can be drawn. The census variables used in this analysis included per capita income, household income, number of gay/lesbian couples, percent college educated or higher, average family size, people per square mile, median age, and average household size. These variables were chosen based on their bearing on socio-economic status and the Wilma’s sense of its own support base.
The picture that emerged was one of more highly affluent and educated communities than the regional norm. The Wilma neighborhoods had higher per capita and household incomes, larger percentages of residents with college education, greater numbers of gay and lesbian couples, and denser populations. They also had slightly higher median ages and slightly lower family and household sizes.

Of the variables described above, three were chosen for the gap analysis: household income, percentage of residents with college education, and people per square mile. These were chosen because they represented the characteristics in which high Wilma patronage neighborhoods were most different from the region as a whole. To find areas of similar demographic make-up to Wilma neighborhoods, Avencia identified census tracts where average household income was higher than $55,000, more than 35% of the population were college-educated, and population density was greater than 2,000 people per square mile. That density figure is quite a bit lower than the average Wilma neighborhood (and indeed lower than the region in general) and was used primarily to exclude areas of very low density.

The map of census tracts meeting these criteria was then overlaid with a map of the Wilma’s existing subscriber base, revealing those areas with high unexploited potential for support of the theater. Southern Bucks County, northern Delaware County, and central Montgomery County, as well as parts of southern New Jersey were identified as the most promising targets for a marketing campaign.

In addition to the gap analysis, two other approaches were also used to identify areas for potential patronage expansion of the Wilma. First, Avencia used data on response rates from the theater’s annual mailings to identify communities with high response rates but low numbers of mailings. Second, Avencia analyzed real estate trends in the city of Philadelphia to locate areas that are experiencing accelerating real estate values not yet matched by an increase in Wilma patronage.

Each year, the Wilma sends two major season mailings to a targeted list of residents throughout the region (Figure 6). The mailing lists are generated from records of subscribers and single ticket buyers to various other arts organizations in the Philadelphia metropolitan area. In general, potential patrons are targeted based on their support of
other organizations whose membership overlaps with the Wilma’s. Because mailings incur significant costs, identifying targets and population segments is a serious undertaking.

Avencia mapped the response rates (percentage of mailing recipients purchasing a subscription) by zip code and highlighted those with higher-than-average response rates but low numbers of actual subscribers. Several zip codes in New Jersey, Bucks County, Montgomery County, and Delaware County were identified as fitting this profile. This suggests that the low number of subscribers in these areas is due to a low number of mailings rather than low support for the theater. The higher-than-average response rate suggests that these areas are more apt to respond favorably to mailings, and that increasing the volume of mail to these areas may increase the number of subscribers.

To identify potential target areas within the city of Philadelphia, real estate information from 1999-2004 was used to identify areas where growth in the local real estate market had not been matched by growth in Wilma patronage. These neighborhoods included Graduate Hospital, the Loft District, Northern Liberties, Bella Vista, Pennsport, Brewertyown, Fishtown, and Powelton Village. In particular, markets in Northern Liberties and Graduate Hospital were determined to present significant opportunities for The Wilma Theater.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR THE WILMA?

The Wilma now has a clearer picture of their patron base. The distribution maps highlight key areas where they have succeeded in their marketing efforts to build a strong base of subscribers, donors and single ticket purchasers. Additionally, areas of high concentration may suggest opportunities for partnerships with other arts organizations, targeted mailings and marketing activities. Armed with the knowledge that there is a larger patron base in New Jersey than previously realized, for example, the Wilma might arrange a co-marketing campaign with a local New Jersey theater or other arts institutions. An additional consequence of the analysis was a move to begin targeting local businesses in high concentration areas to buy advertisement spaces in their PlayBill, as they were now able to demonstrate that a large number of residents living close to these businesses are patrons of the theater. Moreover, during the 2007-08 season, the Wilma marketing team used the results of these analyses to support selection of a billboard location to advertise a play. They chose a location on I-95 from Bucks County heading toward Philadelphia. They posted the billboard in one direction for five weeks, and then switched it (Philadelphia to Bucks County) for another three weeks. After tracking the number of patrons who mentioned having seen the billboard when asked by a box officer at the time of their ticket purchase, the marketing team reported an exceptional ROI of 177% on this specific marketing activity.

With so many Wilma patrons coming from outside the city and so many of the areas for expansion similarly distant from the theater, the marketing team also used this information to inform a major shift in the tone of their marketing campaign. They had focused on superlatives in talking about the Wilma and its productions. In response to this study, they shifted their language toward subtler tones and focused their message more on the whole Center City experience. Understanding that so many patrons would be traveling from farther away, they also more clearly highlighted information on parking and local restaurants.

It is extremely difficult to determine whether or not marketing activities have direct impacts on ticket or subscription sales. One can think of numerous reasons why patrons decide to attend a show or multiple shows in one season and not in another: a season might be particularly appealing to a larger audience; competitors might have less exciting productions; strong word-of-mouth or...
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buzz about a show or a playwright; deeper discounts; more add-on activities at the theater, like ‘Meet-the-Playwright’ or ‘Q & A’ receptions; or just simple yearly rotation, as some patrons patronize multiple theaters but not the same ones in a given year.

However, with those caveats in mind, the Wilma registered overall year-on-year increases in sales in the year following the study. Single ticket purchases from the 2005-06 to the 2006-07 seasons went up by 14% as a whole, with significant increases in Delaware County (22%), Montgomery County (24%), and New Jersey (41%, after decreasing 18% the previous season), which might suggest that the Wilma’s more focused attention to these potentially high return areas paid off. However, during the same period of time, while subscriptions purchases went up by 4% overall, they went down by 2% in Delaware County, and by 1% in New Jersey, which could indicate that single ticket purchases might have ‘cannibalized’ the subscription market. Again these are only hypotheses and cannot be verified with the data that is currently available.

All in all, while one might argue that there is little evidence that ties marketing activities and purchase patterns, these geographic analyses have proven to be useful to the Wilma in a variety of ways. They have given the theater a much stronger understanding of their core patrons and the areas of strong support. They have made it possible to leverage new and stronger interest in areas of high patronage. And they have informed a shift in marketing strategy, in terms of both the language used to promote theater-going experience and the analytical approach used to identify target populations.

APPLICATION FOR OTHER NON-PROFITS

This type of analysis has significant potential for other nonprofits and arts organizations as well. Clearly, any local membership-based organizations could apply a similar analysis to better understand its members and identify gaps in its membership base. That the Wilma had already maintained a database of patron addresses was a major factor in making this analysis feasible. The same would be true for most any membership organization. A service-oriented nonprofit without such a database could still identify the geographical distribution and typical neighborhood demographics of people receiving their services, and a similar gap analysis could be used to identify underserved areas. In summary, geographic analysis can greatly enhance an organization’s ability to understand its constituents, expand its reach, leverage new funding sources, and target ideal areas for expansion.

REFERENCES


Monmonier, Mark. Gap Analysis, Biodiversity, and GIS. http://lib.stat.cmu.edu/scgn/v52/section1_4_0_1.html (accessed 2 October 2006).