

Center Theatre Group

Thinking Outside the Box: Center Theatre Group Builds a Prospect Pipeline with a “Fringe” Group of Young Professionals



According to Liz Lin, Director of Donor Communications at Center Theatre Group (CTG) in Los Angeles, one of the theatre company's main challenges when it comes to prospect research is finding new donors. CTG is a unique nonprofit organization that supports three different theatres - the Mark Taper Forum, the Ahmanson Theatre and the Kirk Douglas Theatre all under the artistic leadership of Michael Ritchie. These three theaters share an average annual audience size of 500,000. Each theatre presents distinctive programming, and donors enjoy benefits and access to all three performance venues. About a third of CTG's donors attend all three theatres during a given season.

CTG's overall operating budget is approximately \$50 million, with 28 percent of their annual income coming from contributed income and the remaining 72 percent coming from ticket sales. Of the total amount raised, approximately 70 percent is from individual donations and the remaining 30 percent comes from Corporations, Foundations, and Government. CTG's Major Gifts program started in 2005 and was later enhanced with a WealthEngine screening of 8,000 donors to identify major gift prospects. Since their screening, CTG has utilized the Circle of Friends feature of FindWealth Online to identify connections between donors and members of their board. Armed with this information, the development team leveraged board members' relationships to build their pipeline of donors - a practice they continue today.

“We segmented by the Propensity to Give (P2G™) score which helped us target our major gift prospects. Then we integrated our WealthEngine results into our Tessitura database which allowed us to track ticket sales and organize any other data more clearly.”

Jennifer Ryen, Major Gifts Coordinator,
Center Theatre Group

Involving the Board

“As we assessed our donor base, we knew there was a need to increase our pipeline of younger donors,” said Lin. About two years ago CTG decided to hold an individual giving retreat with their Development staff to analyze their donor groups and explore ideas for new areas of growth. “We realized rather quickly that we needed to cultivate younger donors,” said Lin. “Some asked our key donors and Board members to leverage their connections and find young professionals who would be interested in developing a membership program targeted to a younger generation (or audience). We then hosted focus groups with these young individuals and used their feedback to implement a new membership group targeted at young professionals.”

Fostering Philanthropy in the Next Generation

In July 2009, CTG launched The Fringe at CTG led by Ryen and Ana Rose O'Halloran, Communications Coordinator. The Fringe is a group of young professionals who love theatre and understand its importance in the community. Members of The Fringe at CTG have the opportunity to explore theatre with their peers in an engaging atmosphere while raising awareness and funds for CTG's New Play Production initiative. The goal is to foster future subscribers, donors and community leaders at CTG.

CTG's Board of Directors saw an opportunity to attract younger donors to the theatre and introduce them to the concept of philanthropic giving by having them serve on a Board. With this concept, a volunteer leadership Board for The Fringe at CTG was implemented. Today, it consists of 11 members. “We've leveraged our Directors' relationships and WealthEngine's Circle of Friends feature to identify and reach out to promising young executives in Los Angeles,” explained Lin. “This network strategy is helping us to grow our future donor base.”

Most members of the Fringe leadership board are in their mid-20s to early 40s. Eventually CTG hopes members will self-identify and transition from The Fringe at CTG to the next donor giving level. So far they have received a gift of \$1,000 from a Fringe member who had previously never given. The expectation is that by engaging members at a younger age, they will continue to support CTG as their careers evolve and their giving capacities increase. CTG uses FindWealth OnlineSM to research members and prospects of the group. When new members join, the staff tries to learn as much as possible about them such as where they work and what they do. “A lot of the information we gather is through internal conversations. Pertinent information, and the member’s associations with other CTG donors is then entered into our Tessitura database,” said Ryen.

The Fringe membership costs \$300 and includes a \$100 tax-deductible donation which makes each member a *Guild Donor* at the theatre. The donation serves as a way to introduce members to the idea of charitable giving. The Theatre has realized a 36% increase in donations from the The Fringe as membership grew from 15 to 42 in one year.

With the creation of The Fringe, Center Theatre Group has increased their visibility with younger community leaders while also educating them about supporting the arts. In a short period of time, The Fringe at CTG has increased younger patrons’ involvement in the arts and encouraged CTG’s board members to support and network with the future donors of CTG. The Fringe at CTG can serve as a unique and creative model that connects the arts, philanthropic giving, leadership and social networking.

