



THE TOOLBOX

DID YOU KNOW?

Authentic Community Engagement

By Nina Simon

NINA SIMON, author of *The Participatory Museum* and the Museum 2.0 blog, will be sharing methods for community engagement during her keynote presentation at the National Arts Marketing Project Conference, November 9–12 in Charlotte, NC. For more about the conference, visit www.ArtsMarketing.org/conference. Here's just a taste of her top tips for engaging new audiences.

- 1 Find a way your audience or community of interest can be genuinely useful in your work.** When you ask someone for help because you need it, you do so with respect and honest enthusiasm. When you ask someone for help because you think you ought to or because you think they need it, it can come off as trivial or half-hearted.
- 2 Make yourself uncomfortable.** If you want to understand why a certain group doesn't engage in your space, deliberately seek out experiences that are unsettling for you. Being aware of how it feels to be confused, scared, or challenged by an unfamiliar situation will help you understand where they are coming from.
- 3 Be an audience to their projects.** If you want to engage a new audience, don't just create something you think will work for them. Go to their festivals, their performances, their community spaces, and engage as a participant. Don't bring a clipboard or survey questions. Just show up and shut up. We're so used to talking and offering what we have. Find out what they have and learn by participating how it is relevant and compelling to them.
- 4 Offer abundant opportunities for feedback and involvement.** A suggestion box in the corner or a Twitter feed managed by an intern only goes so far. If you really want to hear from people, reinforce that message with multiple types of feedback mechanisms. Give them public comment walls and clear access to staff phone numbers and e-mail addresses. Make sure that your conversations with the press reinforce the opportunities for community involvement.
- 5 Listen to your future audience.** It's easy to only hear from the people who are already engaged. They're the ones who have opinions—positive and negative—about your offerings. But if you feel strongly that you need to attract new audiences, you have to find them, learn from them, and be willing to treat their needs as more important than your current or traditional audience. It's hard to change because you only hear the voices that you already have. Imagine new voices, respond to them, and your audience will shift.