

COMMUNITY PRESENTER MANUAL

A step by step guide to presenting live performances in community-run venues



Step 2: Audience Development



REGIONAL
ARTS
VICTORIA

Welcome

Thank you for downloading this chapter of Regional Arts Victoria's Community Presenter Manual. This resource has been designed to help you and your committee present live performances in local halls and other community-run venues throughout regional Victoria. Regional Arts Victoria recognises the important role that community presenters play in the wellbeing and vitality of regional communities, and hope that this chapter supports you to continue this wonderful work in your own communities.

Acknowledgements

First, we would like to acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the lands and waters throughout Victoria. We acknowledge and pay our respect to Elders past and present.

This manual has been created by, with and for community presenters and organisations that support community presenters nationally. We would specifically like to acknowledge the contributions of:

- Merryn Carter – Consultant
- Libby Webster – Tallarook Mechanics Institute
- Gavin Roberts – Stratford Courthouse
- Annette Downs – TasPerforms
- Rosie Dwyer – Regional Arts Victoria
- Ella Bucovaz – Regional Arts Victoria
- Anna Kennedy – Regional Arts Victoria
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Useful links

We regularly share information and resources to keep community presenters up to date with emerging issues. If you'd like to receive updates, we encourage you to join:

- Our [Community Presenters ENews](#) mailing list; and
- Our [Victorian Community Presenter Network](#) Facebook group.

Who and what is this manual for?

This manual was co-written by community presenters, program managers and independent consultants. Its purpose is to give a step-by-step guide to both new and established community presenters on all aspects of presenting live performances. Regional Arts Victoria will aim to review this manual every couple of years so that it remains current, with updated tips, successes and industry best practice.

The manual is divided into sections, so you can either read it in its entirety, or pull out each section to give to the person in your committee looking after that aspect. For instance, the chapter on marketing will be useful to the committee member who has put their hand up to do these tasks. The order of chapters reflects the typical order actions to be taken in preparation to present live shows. We hope this guides you and your committee through managing presenting tasks, as well as providing information on strategic thinking around your activities.

There are a number of guides, templates and checklists that relate to each section, too. These additional resources will assist your committee and/or venue to develop documentation that aligns with industry best practice. For instance, we have a template to assist you in creating venue specifications to send to potential artists.

This manual is a skills development resource created as part of Regional Arts Victoria's Connecting Places program. Connecting Places is Regional Arts Victoria's performing arts touring program for halls and other community-run venues, as well as a capacity building program that supports community presenters to develop audiences and build arts participation in their local communities.

Community presenters are arts councils, halls and mechanics' institute committees, regional festivals and local shire councils that present live performing arts productions in their communities.

Step 2 – Audience Development



Audience participants from Kutcha Edwards' Singing Workshop held at Tylden Hall in 2019.

What is it?

Audience development is about encouraging existing audience members to attend more frequently, as well as identifying community members or groups not currently attending and gaining them as audience members. It's generally easier to get someone who's been once or twice to attend again than it is to get someone who's never been to attend for the first time.

An audience development process should be incorporated as part of your overall Marketing Plan.

Audience Research

Audience development is essentially asking yourself, "who is in my community, and who do I want to program for?"

Many committees program performances they have seen and are passionate about bringing to their community, often for other people like them within the community. Or they might simply have a hunch it will work. Although there's nothing wrong with this approach, in order to build a successful program that caters for the entire community, a bit of research is required.

It is likely you will already have a sense of who your audiences are within the community, but it can be valuable to take a somewhat formal research and planning approach as well. This chapter and its supporting resources outline the questions that will help you get there! By combining formal research with your known informal research, you will develop a solid understanding of the range of audiences or 'segments' within your community, ultimately assisting with your program decision making. Take time to consider the important questions and how you can integrate the research with your program by discussing it with your committee.

Download the [Audience Development Research Guide](#) to get started!

Program Planning

Once you have a sense of who is in your community, and who you think you'd like to aim your programming at, it's time to develop a plan to assist you in choosing these performances.

The below section is taken from our Community Presenters Workbook, created for Regional Arts Victoria by independent consultant Merryn Carter and adapted for this handbook.

Step 1: Who are we programming for?

You're probably programming for 'everyone'

If you're a community presenter or managing a local government-owned arts centre or local government arts program in local venues, your community of interest is probably largely determined by travel distance or local government boundaries. Most local governments are keen to ensure their ratepayers are the principle beneficiaries of the services they provide. This means that your primary focus when you're making decisions on what to program will be your local community.

Keep in mind, though, that not everyone will want to come to your events. Some people just don't think of themselves as the type of person who attends arts events. Don't waste your time trying to convert people who are really uninterested; focus on those who are open to the idea of attending.

And remember that there are **different segments** within your community with different interests and needs. Seniors may like daytime programming so they don't have to travel at night, and younger people may be more interested in contemporary and popular culture connections. Parents of young children might like to bring them to family shows that have an earlier start time or are on during the day on weekends.

Segmenting your audience and thinking about their different interests and needs helps you program for them and market to them better.

Program what's not already available

Before you consider what shows you should choose in your program, take account of what is already available in the local area. Does one of the local pubs already offer rock bands? You should probably leave that to them and look for events that aren't already locally available (although you could consider indie music to attract local teens and twenty-somethings).

Using past attendance to guide future programming

Unless you're starting from scratch, you'll probably have historical records to use to build a picture of what events attract what types of audiences. You may already have established program streams for older people and families, and want to supplement them with streams for younger people and the First Nations community.

If you have a segment within your audience that has attended regularly over a number of years, they are probably a bit more adventurous in their tastes than people who come rarely or haven't been before. You'll need to program a bit more adventurously to keep them interested.

People who have attended certain types of music in the past will probably attend that kind of music in future, and so on within each art form or genre.

Responding to local interest

You might have a flourishing local arts scene, with artists who could be involved in your programs. What are they interested in and how could they be involved?

Are there local dance schools? Try to find dance events that come with workshops for dance students and invite the local dance teachers to bring their students. Offer them special deals for tickets to the performances. Are there local choirs or school choirs? Maybe booking an artist that also does singing workshops would work well.

If you're a community presenter you're probably a local with existing knowledge and networks: put that to use in thinking about what people you know might like.

Step 2: Do we have artistic aims?

Artistic Aims, Goals, Policy or Plan

If you're a community presenter, you may not have anything like formal 'artistic aims', but you might know that you want to bring new or different arts experiences to your community. Or you may have previously developed an Artistic Vision or Policy, or employ someone in an Artistic Director position.

If you don't have any of these things in place, but have a core of frequent, loyal audience members who are really engaged in your programming choices, you will probably have implicit artistic or content goals embedded in your historical programming decisions.

You might want to think about the benefits of creating a written Artistic Plan or Content Policy if you don't have one. This process will help you think through the fundamentals of programming in a new light.

By considering what you want to achieve artistically, whether that's focusing on particular artforms or genres, exploring traditional and/or contemporary practices, perhaps taking existing community interests and developing them further, you will be laying a stronger foundation for your Program Plan.

Bringing your community or Board or Council with you

You may feel driven to see your community tread a more adventurous artistic path. You, your Board and/or Committee may take pride in hosting higher profile artists or events. Your frequent audience members may need something more interesting to maintain their interest and deepen their engagement. It may just be your personal mission. Whatever the impetus, be careful to plan your program and communications strategies to take your audience, your community and your Council/committee with you on this journey. Listen to what others' aims are, too, and find a way to work towards mutual goals as a team.

Pathways to more challenging content

Planning pathways into less familiar, challenging, edgy or risky works is a good way to help your audience understand them and feel more comfortable widening the range of their arts performance experiences.

This recommendation comes from the author's own personal experience working in and with many arts organisations, and from the landmark WolfBrown study, *Assessing the Intrinsic Impacts of a Live Performance* conducted by Alan Brown and Jennifer Novak, who write: "Overall, [...] audiences with higher levels of context can benefit more from certain performances, at least in certain circumstances. We like to think of context as grease on the wheels of impact."

This means that offering talks or workshops by performers or staff before the event, videos of interviews with artists and short excerpts of the work on YouTube, education activities with schools, and even Q&A sessions after the event, can help your audience feel more connected with the experience, that they understand it more. It could also mean programming step-by-step over a number of years, exploring a particular genre by taking your audience on an adventure through an artform, gradually increasing the adventurousness of the content and style.

Consider community interest

Your artistic aims will be unique to your situation and should ideally reflect your community. Is there a particular interest in dance in your region? Or comedy? Or jazz? Take this as a cue for developing one or more of your programming goals, relating to those artforms or genres, or taking a more exploratory approach within a particular genre.



The local CWA put on a spread for their 2021 performance of The Magnolia Tree at Birchip Neighbourhood House.

Step 3: So, what do we want to program?

By working through each of these questions and considering how your answers might affect your programming choices, you'll be systematically building the picture of what you want to program. Make a note of your answers as you work through so that you'll have notes to refer to later when you come to writing up your Program Plan.

- **Are we exploring any artistic themes?**
If we have artistic aims, do they focus on specific artforms or genres? Are we specialising in particular types of art or common themes? Themes could relate to situations relevant to the local/regional community or not. We could become known for particular types or events, genres or artforms, which might help build an audience. What would be relevant to our situation, our community, and our existing and potential audiences?
- **If we have one, is our artistic vision/policy aimed at a particular audience?**
Do our artistic aims have a particular audience in mind? Are we assuming a context, background information, or familiarity by our audience? Do our programming choices encourage or alienate potential audiences or segments?
- **What are our longer-term artistic aims? Where are we heading?**
What do we want to be programming in 5-10 years' time? Is there a longer-term vision?
- **What are our venue's physical limits? What is it inherently suited to, or not suited to?**
What looks and feels good in our venue? What can we present well? What isn't suited to our venue?
- **What is the role of local artists or groups?**
If we have an artistic policy, does it reach out to local artists or arts groups? Is there a place for involvement by local or regional artists?
- **What does our current program look like? What do we imagine future programs will look like?**
How does our current program differ from what we'd like to be programming, or what we'd like to be programming in the future? Can we plan a path to the kind of programming we want to be doing, which will help us build the type of audience we want to attract?

Coming up next: **Step 3 – Selection of Productions/Programming**



A Little Bit of Blue by Little Wing Puppets toured via our Connecting Places program in 2019.

Image by Jeremy Lavender.

Get in touch

Want some clarification or have a question for us? Feel free to get in touch with our Connecting Places Manager using the details below!



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