



Winning Strategies for Expanding Access to Arts and Culture Organizations

While many arts and culture organizations are eager to provide greater access to all kinds of audiences, sometimes the challenge of how to accommodate people of diverse abilities seems a daunting task. The guidelines below suggest ways to provide such audiences an equal opportunity to attend, participate in, and enjoy all types of arts programming. They are excerpted from *Arts Access Made Easy* published by VSA, The International Organization on Arts and Disability. For organizations starting or seeking to expand their own access initiatives, the full report, available online, provides a wide range of resources, including case studies of outstanding programs and detailed information on grant programs and funding sources for obtaining assistive technologies. To download the complete report at no charge, visit http://www.vsarts.org/documents/resources/general/arts_access_made_easy.pdf.

TEN WAYS TO ACHIEVE ARTS ACCESS

Don't let arts access become a daunting task. Break it down into manageable projects, especially if you are just starting your access efforts. You may want to designate an access coordinator, but remember that full access requires a team effort. True access requires extensive community outreach and it can even require architectural renovations. The simplest and cheapest solutions, however, are frequently the most powerful. Let's get to the basics.

Approach Access as a Process

The first step is one of attitude. Arts access is an ongoing process, and it's as fundamental to your organization as the art you produce. Why? Because it's about creating an audience, and art isn't art without an audience. Make access part of the fabric of your organization. Just as you never stop producing new events, exhibits, and programs, you'll find endless ways to include the greatest possible audience.

Make Access Somebody's Job

At every arts institution, there should be a person who has the specific responsibility of arts access. A full-time position is rarely allocated. Some organizations choose a member of their production or facilities management team to take on this important role. This coordinator needs to juggle this role with several other duties, which is why the next step is so vital.

Take Advantage of Free Resources

Free help and resources exist at every level. Do an Internet search on "cultural access" to find a wealth of resources online. Visit <http://www.vsarts.org/x101.xml> for more ideas and information.

Build Relationships

No matter how small your city, there are organizations out there that represent people with disabilities. Introduce yourself and your cultural organization to these groups, and to leaders in these communities. Schedule a meeting. Everyone has to begin somewhere, so don't be afraid to ask questions. Soak up what they have to say. What are their needs? What do they want? How can you make your theatre or museum more accessible to their constituents? They can make your job easier.

Create an accessibility committee made up of these representatives and key staff at your organization. The dialogue at these committee meetings will help you to establish access priorities for your venue. Find out what you're doing right, and what needs improvement. Are assistive listening devices the biggest priority, or an accessible bathroom on the second floor? How many people have used the TTY phone line to purchase tickets? Does your programming include the creative works of people with disabilities? Who should receive brochures promoting upcoming sensory tours?

Evaluate What You've Got

To know what you need, examine what you've got. What physical alterations do you need to make at your facility? Who on the staff needs sensitivity training? (Everyone who works with the public needs it, even the security guards.) Ask your new accessibility committee to help conduct the evaluations and the training sessions.

Set Goals You Can Achieve

Don't aim to rebuild your theatre to adhere to the principles of Universal Design if you are working with a small budget and no staff. Start with what's doable. If you're a small-town theatre, you might include an American Sign Language (ASL) interpreter or volunteer audio describer at one performance. Arts access isn't an all-or-nothing proposition, but it's easy to get discouraged when you don't think you have the financial resources or manpower to make changes. Some changes, like building relationships, don't cost a thing. Remember that it's better to do something small than nothing at all.

Market to Community

Access is useless if the people who can use it don't know about it. Create an access statement that clearly describes what you do offer and your commitment to include all people at your institution. Produce informative brochures to mail to the senior centers, schools, and organizations that work with people with disabilities. Advertise your access offerings in the publications read by these populations (often the same publications read by the general public). Use your newly developed relationships in the disability community to get the word out. Include the Graphic Arts Guild symbols for accessibility in your printed materials. Make sure there is sufficient and clear signage in your arts venue that publicizes the accessibility options available.

Consider Both Sides of the Stage

Arts access isn't just about the audience. People with disabilities sing, dance, act, paint, direct, play instruments, choreograph, design sets, produce, write, sculpt, and do everything all artists do. And their work needs to be staged, performed, and exhibited. If you're renovating your physical space to adhere to Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) codes, make sure the backstage area is accessible. If you're deciding which artists to exhibit in your gallery next year, consider the work of artists with disabilities as well. Seek out the works of playwrights and musicians with disabilities. When holding auditions, include aspiring actors who have disabilities.

Accept Feedback

Establish a process where people can make suggestions, lodge complaints, and commend your efforts. Ask for feedback, openly receive it, and respond accordingly.

Build on What You Create

Let the advisory committee you create be a breeding ground for new ideas and new goals for your institution. When you receive feedback from people with disabilities, put it to use. Never stop creating access. Remember, it's a process. Keep coming up with new ideas and innovations.

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