

A Different Strategy for Becoming Essential

By Sarah Jesse

At about 5:00 p.m. on the night of Oct. 16, 2008, just 17 days before the presidential election, people started filing into the Philbrook Museum of Art to take part in a “Political Poster Print Action.” We had commissioned four local printmakers to each create three politically themed silkscreens from which guests could choose to print their own customized poster. The only stipulation was that the work had to represent both sides of the political spectrum. If they put an elephant in one image, they had to put a donkey in another.

Whether it was the challenge of embracing different points of view or the superheated political climate of the time, the work the artists produced far exceeded our expectations, both in quality and content. The fiercely partisan jostled up against the neutral and the balanced, and outrage stood alongside levity and detachment in the work. In all, the 12 pieces were rough, contradictory, timely and beautiful.

When guests arrived, the first thing they heard was the sound of a DJ from a local alternative rock station spinning an eclectic mix of upbeat music. Guests aged 5 to 60 picked up poster-sized sheets of paper and started making rounds to different stations where the artists helped them experiment with the print-making process to create their own unique posters. The most passionate even doffed their jackets and undershirts to use as media for the silkscreens.

While waiting for the ink to dry, people took advantage of the cash bar, chatted about the election and generally enjoyed each other’s company. One man we spoke with said he had never been to Philbrook before but came because his favorite radio station recommended it. Another first-timer was there because he cared about the election and was looking for ways to participate. We even heard from a mother who brought her 11- and 12-year-olds because she thought it was important for them to engage in the political dialogue. Over again we heard from Tulsans who said they were seeing Philbrook in a new light.

A reporter from the *Tulsa World* was there that night and later wrote:

Philbrook was anything but a stereotypical stodgy art museum during the Political Poster Print Action. . . . A businesswoman in bright red high heels bumped into a teen in worn red Converse All-Stars at one art table as 20-somethings mingled with older Tulsans. A group of teens danced, and a few parents even showed up with their kids.

Another journalist wrote a review of the evening for a local zine, stating that he had been to Philbrook in the past to enjoy the outstanding collection, historic building, and lush gardens. He then went on to describe his

experience at the Print Action:

The crowd was diverse. Obama fans, Palin patriots, that one undecided guy, the young and the old. After several unique and botched screen prints, I began to get the hang of it. I was pumping out original, creative stuff. Philbrook is on to something with these interactive, educational programs. I would return many times over for the Political Poster Print Action.

This journalist started to think of Philbrook in a new way, too, not just for what we *are* and what we *have*—the gardens, building and collection—but for what we *do*. And he wasn't alone.

In the end about 150 people participated in the program—solid numbers, but not spectacular. What really got us excited wasn't the number of people, though: It was the experience they had and the step we'd taken toward making Philbrook not just a respected institution, but a lively, bustling, *essential* community hub.

All of this begs the question, however: Why would a museum like Philbrook, with its collection that emphasizes the past, address the current presidential election? The answer lies in a museum-wide challenge to become *essential* to our community.

The Challenge

“Do you know Philbrook for what it *is*, or for what it *does*?” Rand Suffolk asked this question all over Tulsa—in the grocery store, at the gas station, wherever he went. He was early in his tenure as director of a 70-year-old institution, so he had reason to be curious. As the data came in from members and nonmembers alike, the trend was unmistakable: “for what it *is*.” Clearly Philbrook was a source of great civic pride.

However good that was to hear, underlying this response was the sense that while Philbrook was clearly seen as exceptional, it had yet to prove itself *essential* within its own community. This was the charge that Rand presented to the entire museum. As the new director of education and public programs, I understood that our department played a major role in executing this vision.

The Strategy

We knew our membership base was strong—about 4,000 people and loyal—but we also knew its penetration was shallow outside our core demographic of older, affluent and highly educated Tulsans. We had to reach a broader community. But how? We began to wonder if we had to become more audience-driven rather than collection-based. What would happen if we decided to shift our focus away from what we *had* and what we

were to what we *did*?

Suddenly we started to see the possibilities. We could create alternative programs that complemented the traditional ones while at the same time addressing contemporary concerns. We could connect relevant issues and timely topics to art and to the museum, rather than the other way around. We could draw programming inspiration not just from the objects in our collection, but from the magazines and blogs we read for fun.

Already we felt our creativity had been unleashed. Here were tools that stood a good chance of chipping away at the challenge of becoming *essential* to a broader audience.

The fruits of these talks were a monthly series of events that would be social, multidisciplinary and interactive, with the Political Poster Print Action serving as kick-off. These events would take a variety of forms—lecture, demonstration, hands-on—and each would use as its jumping-off point not an object in the collection, but a hot issue. We knew the topics and speakers would have to interest a diverse audience, from our most devoted members to Tulsans who had never set foot in a museum before. The question remained: How would we accomplish this? Our usual methods would bring in our core audience, but not the broader community we were trying to reach.

There's a radio station here in Tulsa, Z104.5 The Edge. It's an alternative rock station popular among 18- to 29-year-olds, the kind of people who would rather be at a football game or casino than an art museum. We approached them about a partnership and they liked the idea of the series enough to sponsor it both on the air and online through ads and live interviews before each program.

We also approached *Urban Tulsa Weekly*, an alternative newspaper with deep penetration among young, professional Tulsans. In return for purchasing ads to promote the series, *UTW* agreed to contribute editorial content in the form of a preview piece about the Political Poster Print Action. Finally, we designed an attractive e-mail blast and asked staff and friends to forward it to their contacts as another way to reach out beyond our usual audience base.

Our efforts paid off.

The Outcome

Over the next few months after the Political Poster Print Action, we continued to watch our audience for this series grow and transform their perception of Philbrook. For the November program, more than 350 people—from parents with their kids to students and young professionals—came to hear Pixar animator Jay Shuster give rare insight into the process of creating the film *Wall-E* from idea to conception. Through a survey, we learned that 17 percent of these people had never been to Philbrook

before.

And in December, more than 200 adults and teenagers came to observe a collaborative artist team create a large-scale painting and contribute to their own community mural. While some dove right in to the art-making process, others watched the artists, strategizing how they would contribute to the mural. After the program, several participants were inspired to post their photographs documenting the event, as well as positive feedback, on our Facebook fan page. We were also thrilled to discover that this was the first time 23 percent of these Tulsans had ever been to Philbrook.

The Conclusion

Don't get me wrong: A museum's collection will always be its focal point, and Philbrook's is no exception. We continue to use it as the basis for most of our educational programming. But for an arts organization trying to keep its finger on the ever-changing pulse of its community, a permanent collection can start to feel, well, permanent. To find the kind of rich connections to contemporary life we were looking for, we had to think less about the art on our walls and more about the people in our neighborhood.

As you plan your public programs and face your own unique challenges, try thinking first not about what you *have* or what you *are*, but what you can *do*. Make room in your budget and on your calendar for programs that are community-based and audience-driven rather than collection-centric. See if soon you don't start to feel the difference between being exceptional and being *essential*.

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