

# Using Data to Support Program Development and Decision Making:

## Insights from The Loft Cinema

Arts Foundation for Tucson  
and Southern Arizona  
Resource Case Study



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The Loft Cinema is a membership-supported nonprofit arts organization in Tucson, Arizona that has been serving the greater Tucson area and all of Southern Arizona since 2002. The mission of The Loft is “to create a community by celebrating the art and diversity of film”. The Loft fulfills this mission by programming media with three objectives: diversity, excellence, and community engagement, which includes showing movies that represent the voices of the underrepresented population such as women-directed films and foreign and independent films.

In 2017, the Loft screened 620 films and hosted 440 events. They also host two annual festivals: the Loft Kids Fest in July and an annual, international film festival each fall. With over 4,500 memberships representing more than 6,500 individuals and an attendance of more than 240,000 from 2017 to 2018, The Loft is on its way to the best-attended year in its history.

## Engagement Challenge:

In order to evaluate their success at serving the diverse communities in their service region, The Loft Cinema needed to better understand their audience demographics. They had been collecting anecdotal information about their audience through social media, email and zip code, but they felt there was a “hole” in their understanding of who they were already serving; for example, they found that the “likes” on their Facebook page did not necessarily overlap with who their customers actually were. The Loft felt that with accurate audience demographic information they could better analyze their strengths and weaknesses and utilize the data for their future strategic planning and programming conversations, ensuring that they could target through programming and outreach those audiences they wanted to serve, and not just those who already attended their programs and events.

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# Partnering with the University:

In 2016, The Loft staff reached out to the students at University of Arizona's Eller College of Management for advice. When Loft staff initially met with Eller school students, the cinema had no method in mind for how to evaluate audience demographic information. Eller students assessed their issues and recommended using audience surveys, and helped Loft staff to develop a methodology for survey collection that most accurately captured their actual audience demographic.

For example, students suggested that the Loft survey every third person who attended a screening or event, rather than surveying two people who arrive at the theater together. This method can help to provide a statistically significant, random sample of the audience. Students also suggested that Loft staff plan the surveys to be made quarterly, at every screening over two weeks to develop a true picture of who is attending the Loft's general programming.

With suggestions from Eller students, the survey was also designed to increase efficiency and accessibility for prospective respondents. The simple and basic questions are about demographics, education level, zip code, and the number of times the respondent had attended the theater in the past year. The surveys were distributed on paper rather than in a digital format in order to reach audience members who may be intimidated by a digital device. This paper form also increased efficiency because there was less time spent explaining device use.

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# Working with Volunteers:

Volunteers played a key role in implementing the survey. The Loft Cinema has an ongoing volunteer management program with over 130 volunteers and a Volunteer Coordinator on staff who trains and coordinates the volunteer's activities. In order to administer the surveys, volunteers were trained on survey implementation and then stood at tables in front of the theatre with the paper forms. The volunteers incentivized the audience members to take the survey with free popcorn. Once the surveys were completed, the volunteers entered the results into a spreadsheet using a numerical data key, and the results were analyzed by a theater staff member.

## Implementation:

The survey was launched in 2017 and since then the data collection has been running smoothly. The Loft relies on a strong volunteer management system, committed volunteers, and fully implemented procedures for the organization of data. The main challenges to implementation were developing the questions and the methodology by which to collect and manage information, but with the help of the Eller students, Loft staff were able to overcome these obstacles.

As a result of the audience surveys, The Loft Cinema confirmed that their audience was mostly female, (with 2018 numbers showing that 63% of their audience was women), and skewed older, and white. This baseline information gave Loft staff a clear set of goals for future outreach and engagement.

## Engagement Solutions:

To broaden their audience demographic, the cinema implemented several new programs for outreach to people of color and to youth:

- **Solar Cinema:** The Loft's Solar Cinema is a cargo van outfitted with solar panels on the roof and batteries inside that together power a 20-foot inflatable screen, projector, and sound system. This van allows The Loft Cinema to travel to otherwise underserved locations and to take their programming with them to reach people for whom the cinema's midtown location may not be ideal. It also helps to inform various communities outside of Tucson about the Loft Cinema and the kinds of programming it offers.
- **Working with Community Organizations:** The programming team started to work with community organizations such as the Tucson Black Film Club and Native Eyes Film Showcase to develop programs that were of interest to members of each group. By teaming up with these organizations, The Loft's staff learned more about the kinds of film programming that were of interest to more diverse communities.
- **Youth Outreach:** Increased emphasis is now placed on youth programming, not only to reach younger people, but also to develop an interest in film in the next generation of potential cinephiles.

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- **Programming Consultant Volunteers:** For the first time, in 2018, The Loft brought outside programming consultant volunteers from the community to support the development of The Loft Film Fest programming. By including this team of volunteer consultants, the festival had a more broad range of opinions at the table regarding the kinds of offerings that would appeal to the community than they have traditionally had when relying solely on staff for programming suggestions. The resulting Film Fest was the most diverse, and according to the Loft Cinema, the best yet for the organization, and they plan to use this method for programming again in 2019.

These programmatic changes have led to subtle shifts in audience demographics toward a younger and more diverse audience. But The Loft Cinema believes that a true trend would need to be established over several years to confirm that these efforts are resulting in the desired effect, and that these changes are significant and permanent.

## Data Collection Advice for Other Nonprofits:

After successfully implementing its data collection and analysis program, The Loft Cinema advises other nonprofits to jump in sooner rather than later with data collection. They believe that organizations may be surprised at how limited their audience is, and that the sooner they find out more information about their current audience, the sooner they can adjust their programming to try to better reach their intended audience.

The Loft staff also encourages other nonprofit organizations to get creative with how they incentivize survey their audience to respond to surveys. They say that The Loft experimented with multiple methods of incentives, such as raffles, and pleas to support the organization, but discovered that popcorn was what led to the greatest amount of results. While your organization may not have popcorn, there may be some organization-relevant give-away that would lure responses (\$1 off a ticket price, a free drink at intermission, etc.).

***The Arts Foundation for Tucson and Southern Arizona is grateful to The Loft staff for sharing these insights about data collection and related program changes.***



Loft Cinema Jr. 2018, Image Courtesy of Jesse Jackson