Initiating Behaviours in the Performing Arts

SUPPLEMENTARY REPORT : SURVEY ON AFFILIATION AND MEMBERSHIP IN THE PERFORMING ARTS



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Summary

According to the *Survey on Affiliation and Membership in the Performing Arts*, one in ten customers (10.8%) is a behavioural initiator: someone who both says they like to organize cultural outings for friends and who actually has invited friends in the past two years. Income or education does not define them. They are defined by sociability: they go out in groups, attend a greater variety of genres, feel more attached and welcomed, and want benefits that make it easy to bring others along.

- **Who they are:** more often women (12.9% of women vs 5.5% of men), about 4 years younger on average (60.7 vs 64.6), with the same education and income as other customers.
- **How they engage:** they attend the organization more regularly and are prone to buy a membership; they are considerably more likely to attend both in small groups (3-5) and large groups (6 or more; and they give more of their time and presence (community events, volunteering) than their money.
- **What they want:** rewards for bringing friends, small-group discussions after shows and learning activities, guest passes, ticket bundles and small-group memberships. They care less about household memberships and fixed seats.
- **What to do:** identify them, equip them with shareable products, and recognize the audiences they bring.

Who is considered an initiator in the survey

Initiators organize outings to cultural events for friends and family outside of their household, without representing an organization or holding a formal role. They are driven by the joy of sharing a cultural experience, love for the arts, and a desire for social connection. They choose the show, coordinate logistics, and buy the tickets, but above all, they motivate others to come.

About the survey

The *Survey on Affiliation and Membership in the Performing Arts* is a multi-level survey of performing arts organizations and their customers. It was conducted as part of the Re-Imagining Customer Relationships project, commissioned by CAPACOA, Orchestras Canada, the Professional Association of Canadian Theatres, and the National Arts Centre. It was jointly designed, coded, and analyzed by the project partners and HEC Montréal, with input from WolfBrown and Prairie Research Associates. It was funded by the Government of Canada, the Azrieli Foundation, the Metcalf Foundation, and the Chawkers Foundation.

Methodology

The Customers' Survey was fielded between March 31 and May 10, 2026 by 70 performing arts organizations from across Canada. It received 5,669 responses in total; 5,667 are analyzed here, after excluding the responses of two organizations. Customer responses were linked to the organization survey for discipline, region and revenues.

This report focuses on **behavioural initiators**: they hold the attitude and act on it. More specifically, behavioral initiators were identified through a two-step process that incorporated both attitudinal and behavioral criteria:

Group	Definition	n	% of respondents
Self-identified initiators	Strongly agree (5 on 5) with "I'm the kind of person who likes to organize outings to cultural events for my friends" (Q10)	875	15.4%
Behavioural initiators	Self-identified initiators who also invited friends to the organization's programs in the past two years (Q7)	611	10.8%

We compared behavioural initiators with all other respondents across four sets of variables.

Engagement is described through three forms of affiliation with an organization:

- **Who they are:** age, gender, education, household income, 2SLGBTQIA+, Indigenous, disability, racialized, status in Canada.
- **How they engage:**
    - *Behavioural affiliation* reflects patrons' actions: how often they attend (Q2), how they buy tickets (Q4), and how likely they are to deepen their involvement by buying a membership (Q24). It also includes how they have supported the organization in the past two years (Q7).
    - *Attitudinal affiliation* reflects how patrons feel: their emotional attachment to the organization (Q5) and how welcome they feel in its spaces and with its community, staff and volunteers (Q6).
    - *Social affiliation* reflects how attending fits into patrons' broader social lives and identity: whether they attend alone or with others (Q8A to Q8D), and how widely they take part in the performing arts (number of genres attended, Q1).
- **Desired value offering:** how attractive patrons find possible offerings beyond the performance (Q13A to Q13D), ticketing formats (Q14A to Q14D), and purchase flexibility (monthly payment plan, Q15; ticket transfers, Q18).
- **Organization:** discipline, region and revenue tertile.

The test matched the type of variable:

Variable type	Test	Effect size
Categories (e.g., gender, genre)	Chi-square test; Fisher's exact test when a group is very small	Phi or Cramér's V
Ordered categories (education, income, attendance)	Mann-Whitney test	Rank-biserial r or Cohen's d
Scales and counts (age, attitudes, purchase intention)	Welch t-test	Cohen's d

With about 5,600 respondents, even tiny gaps come out significant, so the report relies on effect sizes. Cohen's d of 0.2 is small, 0.5 medium; phi or V of 0.10 is small. When we tested many variables together (18 attitude, social and desired-value measures), we Holm-corrected p-values. "Prefer not to say" and "Don't know" answers were excluded.

Findings

Demographic characteristics of initiators

Gender is the only profile trait with a significant association: women are more than twice as likely as men to be behavioural initiators (12.9% vs 5.5%; Fisher's exact test $p < .001$, $V = 0.11$). Initiators also tend to be slightly younger, averaging 60.7 vs 64.6 years ($p < .001$, $d = -0.29$).

- 2SLGBTQIA+ respondents are slightly more often initiators (15.2% vs 10.5%, $p = .006$), but the effect is negligible (phi = 0.04).
- Education differs only marginally ($p = .026$, $r = 0.05$), and household income does not ($p = .99$).
- Indigenous identity, disability, racialization and status in Canada show no significant difference.

How they engage

Engagement is examined through three forms of affiliation. Behavioural affiliation reflects what patrons do, attitudinal affiliation how they feel about the organization, and social affiliation how arts outings fit into their social lives. Initiators score higher on all three, and the gaps are largest for social affiliation.

Behavioural affiliation: they attend more and are ready to commit

Initiators are more regular and more committed customers than others, with small effects on both attendance and purchase intention (Appendix, Table 1).

- **Attendance (Q2):** Behavioural initiators attend the organization more often than other respondents, with a mean of 3.46 vs 3.09 on a 5-point scale (1 = None, 5 = More than 6 times), a difference of 0.37 points ($d = 0.32$). The difference shows at both ends of the scale: only 2.6% of initiators did not attend in the past year, against 10.7% of others, and 17.7% attended more than six times, against 11.6%.

- **Membership intention (Q24):** Behavioural initiators rate their likelihood of buying the membership they designed almost one full point higher on the 10-point scale (7.60 vs 6.65; median 8 vs 7; d = 0.33). They are a receptive target for a membership offer, especially one built around guest passes, shareable bundles and group plans.
- **Ticket purchasing (Q4):** How they buy tickets makes no difference. Initiators are as common among single-ticket buyers (10.6%) and former subscribers (9.3%) as among current subscribers (11.5%) (chi-square(2) = 1.98, p = .372, V = 0.02).

Initiators' loyalty therefore shows in how often they come and how ready they are to commit, not in the ticket format they use today. Most of them are not subscribers, which leaves room for an offer designed around their preferred modes of engaging.

Supporting behaviours: presence and time more than money

Initiators support their organization by showing up and taking part (Appendix, Table 2). The strongest association is with attending a community event: 16.8% of those who did so are initiators, against 9.6% of those who did not. Volunteers (17.6% vs 10.5%), merchandise buyers (14.3% vs 10.1%) and people who watched a live stream or recording (16.1% vs 10.5%) also include more initiators. Among the 50 sponsors, 36.0% are initiators, but this figure rests on few people.

Donations are a different story. One-time donations, whether up to $250 or over $250, are not linked to initiating. Recurring monthly donations and giving back the value of tickets are slightly more common among initiators, but these effects are negligible (phi = 0.04). Thus, initiators give their time, presence and networks more than their money.

Attitudinal affiliation: more attached and more welcomed

Initiators feel a stronger emotional bond with the organization (attachment 3.87 vs 3.50 on a 5-point scale; d = 0.35) and feel more welcome in its spaces and with its community, staff and volunteers (4.41 vs 4.12; d = 0.35) (Appendix, Table 2). Both effects are small to moderate. Feeling welcome matters for initiators in particular: people who bring friends put their own reputation on the line, and they are more likely to do so where they themselves feel at home.

Social affiliation: group outings and wide tastes

Social affiliation shows the largest differences in the study (Appendix, Table 3). Unsurprisingly, initiators attend much more often with a small group of 3 to 5 people (3.37 vs 2.70 on a scale from 1 = Never to 5 = Always; d = 0.58), as well as with a large group of 6 or more (2.02 vs 1.56; d = 0.52). They attend alone (2.08 vs 1.99) and with one other person (4.06 vs 4.14) as often as others. Group outings are additive for initiators: they are added on top of their other modes of attending rather than replacing them.

Initiators are also omnivores. They attended 4.2 genres in the past two years vs 3.4 (d = 0.43) and named more other organizations they attend (1.9 vs 1.2; d = 0.35). Every genre except music is linked to initiating; the strongest links are with spoken creation (19.6% initiators are among its attenders vs 9.8%), variety (16.1% vs 9.9%) and young audience (16.1% vs 10.3%). Their wide tastes give them more occasions to propose an outing, and more chances to bring friends to genres they would not try alone.

Desired value offering

Initiators display an interest in offerings that enhance the social aspects of outings social. Rewards for bringing friends show the largest gap of all desired-value measures, followed by small-group discussions after shows and learning activities (Appendix, Table 3). They also enjoy flexibility in events selection, in payment methods and in the ability to transfer tickets to their guests.

- **Enriched experience (Q13):** More incentives and rewards for bringing friends is the clearest difference (3.74 vs 2.98; d = 0.55), and it is the only enriched-experience offering that initiators rate clearly on the attractive side. Small-group discussions after performances (2.76 vs 2.28; d = 0.38) and learning activities (3.04 vs 2.57; d = 0.35) appeal more to initiators than to others, although they remain around the midpoint even for them. Making it easy to watch programs at home does not interest initiators more (2.10 vs 2.23, not significant). As other patrons, they want to share the experience in person.
- **Ticketing formats (Q14):** Initiators prefer series they build themselves, choosing their own events (3.73 vs 3.40; d = 0.24). They are also slightly more open to fixed series bought well in advance (3.35 vs 3.13; d = 0.15). Last-minute rush tickets (3.53 vs 3.41) and event-by-event tickets (3.69 vs 3.66) are valued equally by both groups.
- **Purchase flexibility (Q15, Q18):** A monthly payment plan would make initiators slightly more positive about series than others (0.34 vs 0.23 on a 0 to 2 scale; d = 0.19). The ability to transfer tickets from bundles to friends or family is valued highly by everyone (3.96 vs 3.85 on a 5-point value scale, not significant): it is a baseline expectation rather than a way to stand out with initiators.

Together, these results describe the value proposition that speaks to initiators: recognition for the audiences they bring, social experiences built around the performance, and the freedom to commit to a series on their own terms.

Organizational characteristics: initiators are everywhere

Initiators are found in every type of organization, and the differences are negligible (all $V \leq 0.05$). Theatre audiences have the most initiators (13.7%), and music audiences the fewest (7.6%); British Columbia has the most (12.9%), and Quebec the fewest (8.7%). Organization revenue makes no difference (10.5% to 11.1%, $p = .87$).

Managerial implications

Initiators are a volunteer sales force: about one customer in nine already brings others to the organization at no cost. The goal is to find them, make their role easier and recognize it, rather than to sell them more for themselves.

1. **Identify initiators in your own data.** Add the Q10 statement (To what extent do you agree with the following statement? “I’m the kind of person who likes to organize outings to cultural events for my friends”) and a “who did you bring?” question to post-show surveys, and flag accounts

that buy several tickets per order or for groups. Initiators span every discipline, region, and budget size, so every organization has them.

2. **Design shareable offers.** Guest passes, ticket bundles that friends can split, and small-group memberships reflect what initiators value most. Household memberships and fixed-seat subscriptions do not reach them.
3. **Reward the act of bringing people.** Incentives for bringing friends show the strongest correlation in the study (d = 0.55). Consider referral credits, a free ticket after a set number of new guests, or recognition such as early access to the season launch for the group leader.
4. **Make group logistics effortless.** Initiators attend in small (3 to 5) and large (6+) groups much more than others. Offer group seating, one checkout for several buyers, payment splitting and easy ticket transfers, and simple group rates without a minimum of 10 or 20 people.
5. **Give them something to share.** Initiators value post-show small-group discussions (d = 0.38) and learning activities (d = 0.35). Packaged "bring-a-friend" evenings with a talkback or pre-show talk turn an outing into an experience they can sell to their circle.
6. **Cultivate them as community partners, not donors.** Initiators give time and presence (community events, volunteering) more than money. Invite them to ambassador or host roles, and do not expect them to be better donation prospects than other customers.
7. **Use them to reach new and varied audiences.** Initiators attend more genres and more organizations. Cross-promotions with other venues and invitations to discover less familiar genres are likely to travel through their networks.
8. **Target communications with care.** Most initiators are women and younger than the average customer. Messages should focus on hosting and sharing ("bring your people") rather than individual privileges.

Limitations of the methodology

- **Customers only.** Respondents are existing customers recruited through 70 organizations. Results describe initiators within current audiences, not the general population.
- **Self-report.** Both parts of the definition are declared, not observed in ticketing data. Inviting friends (Q7) covers the past two years and does not say how many people were brought or how often.
- **Association, not cause.** The tests show which traits go with initiating, not whether a benefit would create new initiators. Pilot offers (guest passes, group rewards) should be tested before rolling them out widely.
- **Small groups.** Figures for sponsors (n = 50), non-binary respondents (n = 23) and temporary residents (n = 13) rest on few people and should be read with caution.

Appendix

Table 1: Behavioural affiliation: they attend more and are ready to commit

Measure	Behavioural initiators: mean (SD)	Others	Welch t-test	Mann-Whitney	d
Attendance in the past 12 months (Q2; 1 = None, 5 = More than 6 times)	3.46 (1.03)	3.09 (1.16)	t(810) = 8.24, p < .001	p < .001	0.32
Likelihood of purchasing the membership (Q24; 1 to 10)	7.60 (2.60)	6.65 (2.89)	t(803) = 8.42, p < .001	p < .001	0.33

Table 2: Affiliation

Support in the past two years (Q7)	% initiators among those who did it	% among those who did not	p	Phi
Attended a community event	16.8	9.6	< .001	0.09
Sponsored an event (n = 50)	36.0	10.6	< .001	0.08
Served as a volunteer	17.6	10.5	< .001	0.05
Purchased merchandise	14.3	10.1	< .001	0.05
Donated the value of tickets back	15.5	10.5	.003	0.04
Watched a live stream or recording	16.1	10.5	.006	0.04

Support in the past two years (Q7)	% initiators among those who did it	% among those who did not	p	Phi
Recurring monthly donation or fee	19.8	10.7	.009	0.04
Donation over $250	12.7	10.7	.268	0.02
Donation up to $250	11.6	10.7	.437	0.01

Attitudinal affiliation: more attached and more welcomed

Initiators feel a stronger bond with the organization and feel more welcome in its spaces; both effects are small and close to the midpoint between small and medium.

Measure (1 = Strongly disagree, 5 = Strongly agree)	Behavioural initiators	Others	d	p (Holm)
Attachment to the organization (Q5, mean of 3 items)	3.87	3.50	0.35	< .001
Feeling welcomed (Q6, mean of 7 items)	4.41	4.12	0.35	< .001

Social affiliation: group outings and wide tastes

The largest differences in the study concern group attendance: initiators go out much more often with small and large groups, but no more or less often alone or as a pair.

How often do you attend live performances… (Q8; 1 = Never, 5 = Always)	Behavioural initiators	Others	d	p (Holm)
With a small group (3-5 people)	3.37	2.70	0.58	< .001

How often do you attend live performances… (Q8; 1 = Never, 5 = Always)	Behavioural initiators	Others	d	p (Holm)
With a large group (6 or more people)	2.02	1.56	0.52	< .001
Alone	2.08	1.99	0.08	.26
With one other person	4.06	4.14	−0.08	.25

Table 3: Desired value offering

How valuable to you is each of the following? (1 = Unattractive, 5 = Attractive)	Behavioural initiators	Others	d	p (Holm)
Enriched experience (Q13)				
More incentives and rewards for bringing friends	3.74	2.98	0.55	< .001
More opportunities to meet in small groups after performances to discuss the artistic program	2.76	2.28	0.38	< .001
More high-quality learning activities outside of regular performances	3.04	2.57	0.35	< .001
Making it easy to watch programs at home	2.10	2.23	−0.10	.12

How valuable to you is each of the following? (1 = Unattractive, 5 = Attractive)	Behavioural initiators	Others	d	p (Holm)
Ticketing formats (Q14)				
Series or subscription tickets, choosing your own events	3.73	3.40	0.24	< .001
Fixed series or subscription tickets well in advance	3.35	3.13	0.15	.006
Deeply discounted last-minute tickets (e.g., rush tickets)	3.53	3.41	0.08	.26
Tickets event by event, without committing in advance	3.69	3.66	0.02	.62
Purchase flexibility				
Monthly payment plan for series (Q15; 0 = No change, 2 = Considerably more positive)	0.34	0.23	0.19	.014
Transferring tickets from bundles to friends or family (Q18; 1 = No value, 5 = Very high value)	3.96	3.85	0.11	.35

“Don’t know” answers to Q13 and Q14 are excluded. Q15 was answered by 3,540 respondents and Q18 by 1,250.