

A NEW STUDY OF BOSTON ARTS AUDIENCES LAYS OUT CHALLENGES ARTS GROUPS WILL FACE IN REOPENING

Conducted in June 2020, the Audience Outlook Monitor's first phase finds respondents eager to return to performances, but not until public health conditions improve.

Majority of arts goers surveyed won't be ready to return until at least January 2021.

BOSTON – July 30, 2020 – A brand new survey chronicling how local arts audiences feel about getting back to cultural activities in Boston shows an intense desire to return to theater, dance and music performances, as well as museums, but also a significant hesitancy to do so until public health conditions improve.

Conducted by the international arts consulting firm WolfBrown, and sponsored locally by the non-profit arts marketing and advocacy group ArtsBoston and the City of Boston Mayor's Office of Arts and Culture, the Audience Outlook Monitor (AOM) surveyed more than 3,000 Boston-area arts goers from 16 Boston cultural organizations in June 2020. The Audience Outlook Monitor (AOM) is a longitudinal survey to keep tabs on arts attendees' thoughts, concerns and intentions as the pandemic—and the state's reopening guidelines—evolve. The survey is helping arts organizations prioritize decision-making and resource investment as they plan for future programming, fundraising, and audience engagement.

KEY FINDINGS

Overall, 91% of respondents said they were “very” or “somewhat eager” to return to local performances and events. Despite that enthusiasm though, 89% indicated they would pursue cultural events again only when epidemiological conditions improved, including availability of vaccinations, broad testing and treatments, and a reduction to near zero in new infection rates. A majority (55%) didn't expect to return to cultural events until at least January 2021.

Eighty-eight percent (88%) of respondents said the pandemic would have no substantial impact on their long-term future attendance: three-quarters expect to attend the same number of events; 13% plan to attend more. But they expressed caution about the types of activities they would do; in June, they identified museums, outdoor events and community art spaces/studios as the activities they would be “somewhat comfortable” visiting. Respondents who made firm future plans to resume cultural activities expressed confidence that conditions would improve in three (28%) to seven months (65%).

FUTURE SPENDING & SUPPORT

There was other positive news for arts organizations. Eighty-nine percent (89%) of respondents indicated they planned to spend as much money or more on subscriptions, tickets, memberships, and admissions, with the average respondent saying their spending would remain at 99% of previous levels. Similarly, future philanthropic giving appears bright: 96% of patrons indicated they will maintain similar or larger donations to organizations they previously supported.

“We have a long way to go before Boston arts enthusiasts are ready to return to theaters and indoor performances,” says **ArtsBoston Executive Director Catherine Peterson**. “But as this survey tells us, when they *are* ready, they’ll come back with gusto, enthusiasm, and at levels of engagement and support at least as good—or better—than before the pandemic.”

Peterson says audiences’ itch to see live music, theater, dance and opera again bodes well for cultural groups and the related industries that benefit from arts goers’ spending. “Pre-COVID, the arts in Greater Boston made a \$2 billion impact on the region, employed as many people as the pre-pandemic retail industry, and kept the city a vibrant place to live, work and visit. In the past, arts goers outnumbered sports fans four times over. And arts visitors spent more money in restaurants, retail stores and other places than any category of tourist. It’s in everyone’s interest to protect Boston’s cultural assets until they can welcome audiences again.”

MAKING AUDIENCES FEEL SAFE

In order to return to cultural facilities and events, respondents want arts groups to employ best public health practices. Among the measures deemed most important to their feeling safe: daily public space disinfection; availability of hand sanitizer; socially distanced seating; and enforcement of physical distancing guidelines. A large majority of respondents say they will wear masks and adhere to distancing guidelines in order to attend events.

WolfBrown principal **Alan Brown** said Audience Outlook Monitor respondents across the country, especially in Boston, were knowledgeable about public health conditions and appropriate safety precautions. “We were impressed how the open-ended questions posed as part of this survey revealed that respondents understand the science and acknowledge the risks of returning too soon. They are clear that their own personal confidence about the risk being minimal will be what persuades them to return,” he said.

Peterson and Brown said the survey would not have been possible without the support of participating organizations, the thousands of local arts goers who participated in the first round, and future respondents who will make ongoing survey deployments as robust as the first.

ORGANIZATIONAL PARTICIPANTS

The regional arts organizations participating in this survey include: **Actors’ Shakespeare Project; American Repertory Theater; ArtsBoston; ArtsEmerson; Boston Symphony Orchestra; Celebrity Series of Boston; Central Square Theater; Company One; The Dance Complex; Emerson Colonial Theater; Global Arts Live; Handel & Haydn Society; Huntington Theatre Company; Lyric Stage Company of Boston; the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; and the Museum of Science**. Each organization receives its own audience’s responses, as well as the ability to compare their results to other organizations and the group as a whole. ArtsBoston will make the aggregate data available to its full membership of arts groups, to benefit the region’s cultural sector.

The Audience Outlook Monitor is a project of WolfBrown in partnership with ArtsBoston and in collaboration with the City of Boston Mayor’s Office of Arts and Culture. Additional information about the project is available [here](#).

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MEDIA NOTE: Representatives from WolfBrown, ArtsBoston, and participating arts organizations are available to talk about the Audience Outlook Monitor, its results and its impact on arts programming for the 2020-2021 Season. For a summary of the report’s top findings or to schedule interviews, contact John Michael Kennedy, JMKPR at jmk@jmkpr.com or 781-620-1761.