

Thanks, But No Thanks: Why Do Millennial Donors Continually Pass on the Arts?

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Let's do a little thought exercise, shall we?

Let's say you're Coca-Cola and you're particularly keen on cornering the millennial market. So you hire a market research firm that assembles a focus group of 12 millennials and sits them at a table in a board room. A facilitator asks the participants questions like, "Why don't you drink Coca-Cola?" and "What would it take for you to switch to Coca-Cola?" and so on, while executives sit rapt, watching it all unfold behind a glass partition.

Now, what if we applied this activity to nonprofit arts organizations? Many of them—we're looking at *you*, Silicon Valley types—have money to burn. But their charities of choice often aren't those associated with the arts. Wouldn't it be valuable to sit down with a dozen techie-millennials and ask them *why* they're passing over arts organizations?

Well, we wish we could say we've brokered such an arrangement, but alas, we cannot. But here's the next best thing—[this eye-opening piece](#), "With Millennial Philanthropy Money Flowing, Arts Groups Miss Out," from the *Seattle Times*. It's a must-read for any arts organization executive or fundraiser seeking a window into the id of the fickle millennial mind.

For starters, the article confirms many of the ideas we floated in previous posts on this issue, most recently in one titled "[Millennials Without a Cause: How Can Arts Organizations Engage This Demographic?](#)" For example, many millennials are quantitatively oriented, subscribing to the idea of "effective altruism." The *Times* piece quotes 31-year-old Elizabeth Van Nostrand, who lays it out succinctly: "How much money does it take them to save a life? Give to the one that saves the most."

And therein lies the challenge facing arts organizations. Millennial donors want the most life-saving bang for their buck. The good news is that arts organizations can actually compete on this terrain. For example, to someone like Russell Simmons, co-founder of the Rush Philanthropic Arts Foundation, yes, the arts most certainly [saves lives](#), as testified by an ever-growing field of research attesting to the [benefits of arts education](#).

The bad news? It still may not matter. No amount of research can convince certain millennials that providing money to send low-income kids to *Hamilton* is more valuable than helping Africa's rural poor. (Furthermore, many arts organizations lack the resources to produce that granular quantitative data that millennial donors demand.)

Don't just take our word for it. Here's Ben Schwyn, 26, a software engineer: "You could attempt to quantify how much supporting the symphony costs or the probability of someone's life being affected by that and without doing a lot of research, we don't know what those are," he said. "But my estimate is that they are not very effective." Van Nostrand agrees, noting, "Having your life changed by music is incredibly privileged," said Van Nostrand. "People whose lives are changed by not dying—that's a bigger thing."

So what's to be done? Should arts organizations give up on the millennial demographic and hope that their white-haired symphony benefactors can hang on another 20 years via the miracles of modern medicine? Of course not. Two recent IP posts look at ways arts organizations can reach this group without resorting to the "our chamber orchestra is more important than that vaccine" argument.

First, opera and ballet companies in San Francisco have begun wooing tech types, and [their efforts](#) may serve as a

bellwether for organizations in other gentrifying cities. Secondly, check out how the Seattle-based ACT Theatre and local arts organizations plan to [engage technies](#) through the theater thanks to a Doris Duke Charitable grant.