

## Who is Our Customer?

*looking forward by looking within*

Kent Paulsen, Director of the Dudley Birder Chorale

In fall 2024, the Dudley Birder Chorale of St. Norbert College will celebrate its fiftieth anniversary, and, like most 50-year-olds, we of the Chorale find ourselves in a collective mid-life crisis! Recent trends for the Chorale included the passing of Dudley Birder, namesake of the group, at age 95, along with the recent passing of some of our most generous supporters. Add to that the pandemic, the gradual decline in the popularity of classical music, and the aging demographics of our audience and singers, and we could clearly see a possible future of “decline and collapse.” What would we look like at 60 or 75?

Lucky for us, one of our officers, Tom Schumacher, is also a fierce advocate for Envision Greater Green Bay, and Tom willed us into the foresight workshops! Our board officers enrolled in Envision’s strategic foresight training to consider the future of our organization, and, in a wider context, the future of performing arts among community groups.

Right off the bat, I was fascinated, hearing from the different organizations in our cohort. Not many were non-profits, and none were in the arts. I listened as businesses talked often about their customers, supply-chain issues, product development and more, with consistent language and tools, and I was struck by this nagging question—why haven’t we looked at our organization from this perspective? Obviously in the arts we put the *non* in non-profit, but were these analysis tools and foresight process something that could help us re-think the *community performing arts* model?

Symphonies, operas, choirs, ballets and many of the “traditional” performing arts groups around the country are closing at alarming rates, and, while we might not be able to reverse that trend regionally, we were determined to see if our future horizons could bear fruit!

Two major insights emerged as we went through the foresight process: 1) Collaborations with other performing arts groups in our area are a win-win proposition; and 2) Really asking the question, “who is our primary customer?” might be important.

Some immediate benefits we’ve seen with our collaborations with other like-minded groups came about as we realized that they are not our competitors—our industry grows together. Our real competitor is Netflix and the streaming culture of on-demand anything-at-any-time. In October we held a joint concert with the Civic Symphony of Green Bay; it was our first sell-out in many years. This past summer, the four main classical music organizations in Green Bay formed a new partnership called “Great Music Green Bay.” Expect to hear more about this partnership. And now we’re on the verge of announcing another exciting new partnership in the coming months!

As we really dug into the question of who our primary customer was, we concluded that it was actually not the *audience* at our concerts. In the professional model, the audience is certainly the primary customer, but local and community performing arts non-profits simply don’t generate enough product, content, and experiences to keep customers engaged year-round. Instead, as we considered that perhaps our singers/members were really our primary customer, a whole new way of thinking began to

emerge. Why would someone pay to do something they love, give up every Wednesday for rehearsal along with some holidays and weekends, buy a dress or tux to perform, be expected to make extra donations, cajole their friends and family to buy tickets, and keep doing this year after year? The answer is simple—because it has value *to them* and means something *to them*, and they love the experiences and the community of other singers!

As we began to focus on our members' core experiences, viewing this as our primary customer base, an interesting question arose: If our singers are the primary customer, what role does the audience play? The audience experience really is symbiotic, we now understood. Audiences experience the joy of music and the joy of seeing performers they know doing something they love. And the performer's experience is enhanced by having a full audience, which has led us to re-evaluate all the traditional ideas about ticketing, pricing and seating. Suddenly we had a whole new way of looking at ourselves and our work.

The focus on the member experience has opened a new window on the future. We now realize that expanding our repertoire to include more contemporary works, foregoing ticket revenues to encourage larger and more diverse audiences, collaborating with other "great music" organizations, expanding our rehearsals and performances to virtual and alternative venues – they all enhance the "customer" experience.

Envision's strategic foresight workshop allowed us to consider our preferred future and how we might get there. We have begun a "horizon-two" pursuit of that future and have seen our membership and audiences grow, including our recent sold-out performance and a marked growth in audiences for our Christmas concerts. We look forward to sharing the foresight vision with our Chorale members as we undertake a transformational journey to a reinvigorated tomorrow.