

To Charge or Not to Charge: Admission Fees, That Is

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Recent announcements from several cultural institutions highlight what may be **a new trend** around the nation to increase attendance by lowering – or eliminating – admission fees. This is a **significant shift** from the thinking just a year ago or so when museums – including New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art (MOMA) – chose to deal with budget problems by raising those rates.

In early January 2018, the MOMA **announced a change** to its policy of a “full suggested donation” of \$25 for adults, \$17 for seniors, and \$12 for students. While in 2004, 63 percent of attendees paid that amount, by 2017, the rate had plunged to just 17 percent. Visitors simply opted out of the amount the museum had set.

This set-admission charge now applies to all out-of-state visitors; in return, they get a three-day pass. New Yorkers continue to pay whatever amount they wish so long as it’s more than a penny. In implementing this change, MOMA officials explained they had **trouble persuading a major donor** to step up and subsidize admission costs because these benefactors generally prefer giving money to a capital campaign so they can receive naming rights to a building or gallery.

Admission Fees Experiments in Museums

In the year or so since MOMA made the change to raise admission fees, a few arts institutions have adopted the opposite approach; that is, to waive them in some cases. Los Angeles’s **Museum of Contemporary Art** (MOCA) has just announced adoption of a **free admission policy**, following the lead of others including **The Broad** and the **Hammer Museum** at UCLA. In each case, a major donor stepped up to subsidize the move.

This thinking “**may seem counterintuitive**” but it made perfect sense to MOCA’s board president, Carolyn Clark Powers, who donated \$10 million for this purpose. She believes that “charging

admission is counterintuitive to art's ability and purpose to connect, inspire, and heal people." This decision also reflects a "**re-thinking of the museum's place** in the community." MOCA director Klaus Biesenbach explains: "As a civic institution, we should be like a library, where you can just walk in." The policy, he says, "is not about growing attendance, but is focused on advancing accessibility."

Ms. Powers's gift of \$10 million will cover admission revenues for about five years, but MOCA sees this policy change as permanent and will look to "**create new fiscal strategies** and develop revenue streams" to cover losses from admission fees. There is also a hope that the move will encourage new donors to participate in underwriting this policy.

New Trends in Theater Admission Fees

There are similar "counterintuitive" whiffs of change floating through the nation's theater companies as well.

The **Intiman Theatre** in Seattle, fresh from paying down a debt that had topped \$2 million, instituted a policy change – at least for its next production, "The Events." It's **giving away all tickets** to this play. If successful, the company "may extend the offer" in the future. Executive director Phillip Chavira is "confident" they can raise enough money to cover the costs of this production from "members of the community who **share their vision** for providing 'free access to professionally made art.'" The free tickets reflect "a concrete manifestation of the company's mission: to wrestle with inequities."

Ordinarily, just 20 percent of the organization's total budget comes from ticket sales. The chosen play "may be the **perfect theater piece**" to support this fee change. With only two cast members, it has lower production costs than most plays. It also covers a timely topic with appeal to a community-based effort. It was inspired by the mass shooting in 2011 in Norway; it "explores our search for healing and forgiveness in the wake of a mass shooting. Each showing will integrate a different community choir into the performance," adding further to publicity opportunities and interest around this project.

Meanwhile in Philadelphia, two small theater companies are trying out **new, subsidized inclusive ticketing strategies.**" At the **Curio Theatre**, the production of Shakespeare's "The Winter Tale" will be offered on a "pay-what-you-will" basis. There is a \$10,000 grant from the **Wyncote Foundation** and officials hope that the goodwill the organization has already established in the socioeconomically diverse neighborhood of West Philly will help this experiment along.

In 2016, the **Azuka Theatre**, which advertises itself as "telling the stories of outcasts and underdogs" instituted a pay-what-you-will model for all of its productions. There's **an interesting twist here**, though: Audience members are asked to make payment as they leave the venue, "based on the value they place on what they've just seen on stage." For the first two years, the company had support from a grant from the **Barra Foundation**; this generosity was extended for the current season as well because of the success of this model. Artistic director Kevin Glaccum explains that their numbers "have gone up in attendance and income. Considerably. Like, 30 percent. People are giving us more money, and more of them are coming."

Conclusion

Is this “the next wave in growing theater audiences”? asks Eileen Cunliffe of The Nonprofit Quarterly, who invites input from theaters around the nation about their thoughts and experiences.