ARTISTS AS

The needs of creative artists are marketing opportunities.

by Joan Jeffri

Artists are often portrayed as starving in garrets or enjoying lives of international celebrity. But the reality of most American artists' lives falls somewhere in between. Many artists are well educated but not affluent. Many receive incomes from work outside their art, but not legal or medical protection. And marketers are just beginning to see the opportunities in meeting artists' special needs.

Ninety-five percent of New York State artists who applied for fellowships to the New York Foundation for the Arts in 1985–86 have gone to college, and 59 percent have gone to graduate school, according to a 1986 survey conducted by Columbia University's Research Center for Arts and Culture. But these artists' top educational qualifications do not reap the highest financial rewards. Twenty percent of the 900 artists surveyed had annual pretax household incomes below $10,000, and 56 percent had incomes between $10,000 and $30,000.

In a larger survey conducted in 1980 by the AFL-CIO, members of five national performing artists' unions had more years of schooling than the median of 12.7 years for American adults. At least two-thirds of the members had been to college, and among broadcast artists, 96 percent had. Broadcast artists are also the best-paid group. Fifty-eight percent had annual household incomes of $30,000 or more in 1980. But from 39 percent to 46 percent of singers, musicians, actors, and dancers had household incomes of less than $15,000.

Singers, musicians, and actors had

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median household incomes above the national median of $17,709 in 1980. Dancers fell below that figure, and broadcast artists were far above it. The 1980 median household income of college-educated householders was $28,047, however, and most artists’ household incomes fell below that mark.

According to the 1980 census, nearly 1 million Americans are actors, directors, announcers, architects, authors, dancers, designers, musicians, composers, painters, sculptors, craft artists and artist printmakers, or photographers, or are higher-education instructors of art, drama, and music, or are some other kind of artist that does not fit any of those categories. Mid-decade adjustments bring that figure close to 1.5 million. Artists could be a prime target for marketers of legal, medical, financial, and housing services, especially in major metropolitan areas. But until recently, their needs have been overlooked or ignored. While rich artists may be the most visible, the majority of artists are neither rich nor starving.

TAX ADVICE

The arts community is not completely without specialized services; many are offered by the arts community itself. In the last two decades, nonprofit organizations have begun offering free or low-fee legal aid to artists in art-related matters. Today, there are more than 35 Volunteer Lawyers for the Arts agencies in the U.S., and the American Bar Association has special committees devoted to sports, entertainment, and the visual arts. Arts unions, service organizations, and artists’ membership groups also offer a potpourri of services.

Some artists’ legal agencies, like Bay Area Lawyers for the Arts in California, help clients avoid costly legal action by offering programs in negotiating strategies for artists, contract preparation, and bargaining. Artists need legal advice most often in the areas of taxation (19 percent needed it in the last three years), followed by contracts (15 percent) and landlord issues (7 percent), according to Columbia University Research Center’s New York State study.

Writing grants and raising funds are critical skills for artists, and dozens of organizations and consultants are available to help. But another, smaller, group of organizations has evolved to help artists with financial planning, accounting, bookkeeping, and taxation. The financial advice artists most need is tax help (42 percent needed help during the last three years), followed by assistance with record keeping (15 percent), according to the New York State survey. Some arts unions help members prepare their income-tax returns at little cost. Groups like Accountants for the Public Interest offer low-cost specialized advice for which artists can qualify if they have institutional affiliations. But many of those programs are little known and underused because their officers do not know the size or needs of the local arts market.

ARTS AT HOME

Artists in New York State have different wants and needs regarding their living and working spaces. Some want the two functions in the same place; others want home and studio in separate places. Yet in the 1986 survey, most lived and worked in the same space (67 percent). A large proportion of those artists (45 percent) had moved their residences between one and three times in the past five years. In regard to work space, the most common reason for a move was a rent increase (18 percent).

Many New York City artists are angry at the real-estate industry and unhappy with ongoing gentrification, of which they are often a part. “Dentists’ wives who do photography and rich kids stringing beads living in SoHo and NoHo,” was how one artist described the newcomers to arts communities. “Tribeca is ruined. Midtown is packed. All this loft living is pushing artists out.”

Artists in New York City and other cities have been used by developers to market neighborhoods. Artists move in, gentrify neighborhoods, and raise real-estate values. Yet maintaining a neighborhood as an artists’ enclave requires forethought by developers and planners. It requires a long-term view of growth and profits, not the urge to make a quick buck off cultural resources.

THE BIGGEST MARKET

Health services offer perhaps the most clear-cut opportunity to reach artists as consumers. Following the example of sports medicine clinics, specialized treatment centers for performing artists are beginning to appear. The artists’ market may be a logical place for health providers and insurers to test new plans for specialized long- or short-term health coverage. As the New York State survey indicates, artists are highly educated and understand the need for as much insurance, medical, and emotional help as is possible. In New York State, 77 percent of the surveyed artists have some health or medical coverage, and 31 percent of those with health insurance also have some form of dental coverage. The average annual household income of artists who have health insurance is about $25,000.

Currently, there are special arts medicine programs in more than ten U.S. cities. In New York City, the Kathryn and Gilbert Miller Health Care Institute for Performing Artists has a voice laboratory and a professional dance floor. On its staff are physicians who specialize in treating the hand problems of musicians, the orthopedic problems of dancers, and the ear, nose, and throat problems of actors and singers. The Institute also offers programs on stress management and biofeedback,
AN END TO A MYTH

It's bad business to market to stereotypes. Take, for example, the widely held belief that most artists must sacrifice economic rewards to pursue their creative impulses. Randall K. Filer, an economist at Hunter College and the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, uses the 1980 census to shatter that myth.

The classification of artist includes actors, directors, authors, dancers, choreographers, designers, musicians, composers, painters, sculptors, photographers, and college instructors in the creative and performing arts. Although artists in general earn less than the average U.S. worker does, Filer found that the difference amounts to only $750 a year. And much of that difference can be explained by the special characteristics of people in the arts.

Professional artists are younger than other members of the labor force in general, and beginning artists earn less than other entry-level workers. But Filer discovered that artists make up for their low entry-level earnings, because older artists earn more than other workers. Filer predicts that artists on average can expect to earn an average of about $403,000 in their lifetime, compared with $415,000 for other workers.

Young artists now dominate the arts not because older artists get discouraged and quit—in fact, artists are more likely to stick with their profession than are other types of workers, according to Filer—but because the arts are growing. Between 1960 and 1980, the U.S. workforce increased by 43 percent, but the number of artists, writers, and entertainers increased by 144 percent.

Among the professional groups within the arts, salaries vary widely. Actors and designers earn more than the average worker, and dancers and musicians earn less. Some minority groups do better in the arts than in the work force in general. The earnings difference between blacks and whites, for example, is less in the arts than in other professions. And unlike the population in general, artists who are not citizens of the U.S. earn more than artists who are citizens. When all the evidence is examined, it is clear that underestimating the size and potential of the arts market would be a mistake.


—Judith Waldrop

a phobia program, a substance-abuse program, and an AIDS treatment program. Among its clients are dancers from the New York City Ballet and singers from the Metropolitan Opera and the New York City Opera.

In San Francisco, at least two health programs compete for artists' business. The University of California Health Program for Performing Arts uses medical professionals who are also artists, such as a psychiatrist who is a violinist and a social worker who is a dancer. Saint Francis Memorial Hospital has special services in its Center for Sports Medicine that deal with nutrition and dance medicine. It provides medical care for the Oakland Ballet and on-site care for the San Francisco Ballet.

Arts medicine programs are rapidly growing more sophisticated. The Cleveland Clinic's Medical Center for Performing Artists distributes a brochure that looks like a cross between a music program and a museum catalog; its informational sections are entitled "Overture," "Theme," "Development," "Orchestration," and "Coda." Los Angeles has the International Center for Dance Orthopedics and Dance Therapy, and the Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston is well known for its treatment of the hand problems of musicians. Other arts clinics have been established in Denver, Cincinnati, Indianapolis, and Norristown, Pennsylvania. In Chicago physician Alice Brandfonbrener runs an arts medicine program at Northwestern Memorial Hospital and edits the first journal on the subject, Medical Problems of Performing Artists. In Philadelphia the Arts Medicine Center at Thomas Jefferson University Hospital is situated near the 150-member International Arts Medicine Association. A national organization called the Center for Safety in the Arts, which has offices in New York City, deals with problems of dangerous and toxic substances that affect artists and publishes a newsletter called Art Hazards. And there are now counselors, psychologists, and psychiatrists who specialize in helping performers who are trying to change careers.

AIDS adds a new wrinkle to artists' 

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