

# BUILDING PARTNERSHIPS WITH CHAMBERS OF COMMERCE

How does your mission align with that of your local chamber of commerce, and how can you partner to benefit the arts, business, and community development sectors? This tool-kit, based on interviews with several practitioners in the field, examines how your peers have formed working relationships with their local chambers, and outlines concrete steps and tips for doing the same in your community.

According to Americans for the Arts' [2015 Local Arts Agency Census](#):

## 66% OF ARTS ORGANIZATIONS CURRENTLY HAVE EXISTING PARTNERSHIPS WITH CHAMBERS OF COMMERCE.

**Of those arts organizations' partnerships with chambers of commerce:**

- 51% are having conversations with chamber executives
- 34% are actively working with chambers
- 16% have integrated the arts into chamber of commerce programming

These partnerships are part of a growing trend. With over 3,000 chambers of commerce in the United States, according to the [Association of Chamber of Commerce Executives](#), the opportunities for collaboration are abundant. While great work is already happening, the fact that only 16% of local arts agencies surveyed have integrated the arts into chamber programming demonstrates that there is still opportunity for growth.

Chambers of commerce and local arts agencies have the potential to create dynamic, mutually beneficial partnerships that diversify audiences and build sustainable support networks rooted in local communities.

# WHAT ARE CHAMBERS OF COMMERCE?

Chambers of commerce are organizations of businesses that collaborate in order to further the economic interests of and advocate for the private sector. Chamber members are voluntary paying businesses that collectively elect a board of directors and/or executive council to create policy decisions and set broad goals. Through chamber functions, member businesses are able to network, protect their vitality, and promote prosperity in their communities.

# IS THIS TOOL-KIT RIGHT FOR YOU?

This tool-kit is designed for local arts agencies, which are [defined by Americans for the Arts](#) as either private community organizations or local government agencies that integrate the arts into the daily fabric of their communities and work to advance the arts locally. However, the information included in this tool-kit is not solely applicable to local arts agencies and can be used by any arts group seeking to form an arts-oriented relationship with chambers of commerce.

# WHY CHAMBERS OF COMMERCE?

Local arts agencies can benefit from chamber of commerce partnerships by:

- Gaining valuable business contacts
- Broadening audiences for artistic programs and events
- Expanding financial support for local arts agency programs
- Utilizing combined resources to enhance community and economic development

# WHAT DO LOCAL ARTS AGENCIES HAVE TO OFFER?

Chambers of commerce can benefit from local arts agency partnerships by:

- Building market share, enhancing brands, and reaching new customers
- Using the arts to help get a message across in engaging ways
- Promoting a vibrant community for employees
- Creating an environment that blends backgrounds, ethnicities, and cultures

More benefits of arts and business partnerships can be found through The pARTnership Movement's [8 reasons to partner with the arts](#).



# ARE YOU READY FOR A CHAMBER OF COMMERCE PARTNERSHIP?

Local arts agencies should be in constant conversation with local chambers of commerce. However, developing a robust relationship through these conversations depends on timing and an alignment of motivations and goals. To determine if your arts organization is ready, you should:

## **Start a conversation**

Find a contact through the chamber website, or the website of a chamber member, and initiate a telephone conversation or meeting. Make sure to consider your existing contacts: Are your board members part of your local chamber? Have you worked with anyone in the past or have an acquaintance who can connect you to someone at the chamber? Use the [Business Speak](#) tool-kit to find out more about how to speak with business leaders and chambers of commerce about the arts.

## **Determine if the chamber has shared values, priorities, or goals**

Arts organizations can learn about chambers' values by visiting their websites, attending their meetings, becoming chamber members, and having ongoing conversations with chamber members.

## **Evaluate if the chamber has a history of involvement in economic development**

Many chambers of commerce primarily deal with policy advocacy. Most organic connections with local arts agencies occur over economic development goals. For instance, tourism is an example of a common point of connection between chambers and arts organizations.



# TIPS FOR ESTABLISHING SUCCESSFUL RELATIONSHIPS

The leaders of local arts agencies around the country gave the following checklist of advice when asked how to form relationships with chambers of commerce:

## **Find the best point of connection to your chamber of commerce**

Ensure that both groups have the same goals and are open to similar ideas on how to achieve them. For instance, finding a chamber that has a focus on economic development can spark an organic connection with the arts community. If you are in a larger urban area, you may have access to multiple chambers of commerce. Search for the one that best aligns with your goals and values.

## **Be proactive**

Arts organizations should get in touch with chambers of commerce by meeting with members and attending chamber events often. It is important to make sure your voice is heard at networking events and other functions. Being proactive about connecting with your chamber is a necessary step in establishing shared values, and promoting the message that you are looking for a mutually beneficial partnership, not just one that solely addresses your own needs. It is important that you fully engage with your chamber, which may mean becoming a dues-paying member and sitting on chamber committees that address areas of focus other than the arts, in addition to being present at meetings and events.

## **Be the point of connection**

Look at where there is a lack of connection between major stakeholders in your community and be that connection. Successful partnerships have emerged from local arts agencies who orient themselves as a point of connection between the chamber of commerce, arts organizations, city government, and local colleges and universities. For instance, the [Arts & Business Alliance of Eugene](#) has served as the point of connection between five local institutions: City of Eugene Municipal Government, University of Oregon, Linn-Benton Community College, Eugene Cascades & Coast, and the Eugene Chamber of Commerce.



### **Sell the partnership as an opportunity for branding**

Memberships to chambers of commerce can be hard sells in unsteady economic climates, so they need to boost membership by advancing unique opportunities for their members that other business alliances cannot offer. Creating programs and events with local arts agencies, such as networking and employee engagement opportunities for local businesses, are a perfect way to do that. Use this as a selling point when proposing a partnership with your local chamber. The pARTnership Movement's essay, [Put Your Company in the Spotlight](#), can give you more ideas on how to talk with chambers about enhancing brands and building market share through the arts.

**CHAMBERS ARE ALWAYS LOOKING FOR UNIQUE OPPORTUNITIES TO OFFER THEIR MEMBERS. IT IS IN THE BEST INTEREST OF CHAMBERS TO BRAND THEMSELVES WITH ARTS GROUPS IN ORDER TO CREATE THOSE OPPORTUNITIES.**

*– In a conversation with Laura Bruney of the Arts & Business Council of Miami in Miami, FL*

### **Practice consistent communication**

Without regular meetings and discussions, a connection cannot sustain itself. Make sure to reach out as often as appropriate, even if it is just a quick phone call to give updates, catch up, or listen and learn about the motivations and activities of the chamber as often as possible.

## **Use data to your advantage**

Chambers are run by business-oriented people who care about numbers and quantifiable success. Provide them with research on the benefits of business partnerships with the arts, such as national data from Americans for the Arts' [Arts & Economic Prosperity IV Report](#). Resources within your state or region may also be available. For instance, [ArtsFund](#) and the [Colorado Business Committee for the Arts](#) publish regular studies on the economic impact of the arts in the greater Seattle and Denver regions, respectively. If you are interested in pursuing the development of such research in your community, [Americans for the Arts offers customized survey services](#). In addition to existing data, take small, early steps to establish artistic programs and initiatives that demonstrate measurable changes. For instance, [ArtsinStark](#) of Canton, Ohio started a community arts festival called First Fridays in 2007. After communicating festival visitor data to the chamber, ArtsinStark was able to establish the potential for more substantial collaborations in the future.

**ARTSINSTARK APPROACHED THE CANTON CHAMBER OF COMMERCE WITH HARD DATA ABOUT THE FIRST FRIDAYS THAT DEMONSTRATED EARLY GROWTH IN VISITOR TURNOUT. AFTER REVIEWING THE NUMBERS, THE CHAMBER OFFERED ARTSINSTARK SEVERAL BUILDINGS IN DOWNTOWN CANTON FOR CONVERSION INTO STUDIOS AND GALLERIES, STARTING WHAT WOULD EVENTUALLY BECOME THE CANTON ARTS DISTRICT.**

*– In a conversation with Robb Hankins of ArtsinStark in Canton, OH*

## **Choose the best program for you and your local chamber**

Choosing the best program means finding one that matches your capacity and promotes the shared values between your local arts agency and chamber of commerce. The best program is one that is mutually beneficial. For instance, starting off with a networking happy hour is a great way to immediately benefit members of the arts and business community.



### **Try, try, and try again**

Don't be surprised if a chamber of commerce turns you down. Not every chamber is willing to partner with local arts agencies at a given moment. However, be determined and keep trying. Continue to maintain contact and attend chamber events, as that will build the foundation necessary for a future partnership. Many successful partnerships have formed only after multiple attempts to find the right shared values at the right time.

## **DON'T BE AFRAID OF REJECTION. NOT EVERY CHAMBER WANTS TO PARTNER WITH YOU, BUT THERE IS ONE OUT THERE THAT WILL.**

*– In a conversation with Robb Hankins of ArtsinStark in Canton, OH*

## **EXAMPLES OF SUCCESSFUL COLLABORATIVE PROGRAMS**

The leaders of local arts agencies around the country gave the following examples of programs when asked how they have successfully formed relationships with chambers of commerce:

### **Networking Events**

Networking events between arts organizations, artists, and businesses are popular collaborations between local arts agencies and chambers of commerce. In particular, Young Professionals or Emerging Leaders networking events are great opportunities for business leaders to connect with the arts. The Arts & Business Alliance of Eugene in Oregon facilitates an annual [Arts After Hours](#) event which is attended by over 20 arts organizations and 300 individual participants.

### **Community Events**

Concerts, art fairs, and gallery crawls are just a few examples of programs co-hosted by local arts agencies and chambers of commerce, and each offers the opportunity for members of the arts and business communities to connect, network, and share ideas. As it was stated before, ArtsinStark developed a very successful community arts festival, First Fridays, which regularly connects businesses and arts groups in an event that draws over 7000 people in the summer months.





# PARTNERSHIPS IN PRACTICE

In Boulder, Colorado, Deborah Malden serves as the Arts Liaison for the [Boulder Chamber](#). As Boulder has the [8th largest concentration of artists in the country](#), it is no surprise that strong programming through the chamber has supported a bustling arts community. The chamber's work in advocacy has helped with the passage of a sales tax that has raised \$8 million for venues and public art. The city has also identified the chamber as an ally in four of eight strategies of its cultural plan. To date, the chamber regularly hosts:

- Symposiums, such as one hosted with the Urban Land Institute, discussing the [economic impact of the arts](#) and spatial development.
- After hours networking events that promote the arts
- Holiday Star Lighting, an annual holiday event hosted by the chamber, supported by holiday card sales featuring the art work of a local artist commissioned by the chamber.
- A week-long celebration of the arts started in 2014, which brings together businesses, artists, city government, and the chamber.
- Participation in and support of the launch of a new group that promotes arts philanthropy.

## Symposiums

These can come in the form of leadership development seminars, roundtable discussions, webinars, and information sessions. In Cincinnati, Ohio, [ArtsWave](#) hosts skills development forums such as the [Art x Tech Challenge](#), a weekend event where arts organizations and members of the business community join together to use their skills to problem solve issues facing the Cincinnati community, while learning about the overlap between the arts and their businesses.

## Creative Exchanges

These are programs in which local arts agencies send skilled artists to businesses to help them imbue their business work with creative practice. A creative exchange program can be built from previous successes in networking and community events and symposiums. The [Arts + Business Council of Greater Philadelphia](#) created the [CreativeXchange](#) leadership program, which consists of four sessions that partner creative thinkers and artists with business leaders to teach skills that can be applied to their sectors. These lessons focus on using the creative process to drive innovation in the workplace.



# CASE STUDIES

Information for this tool-kit was synthesized via phone interviews with the leaders of Local Arts Agencies and Chambers of Commerce around the nation. Participants included the Arts & Business Council of New York (NY), Greenwich Village Chelsea Chamber of Commerce (NY), ArtsinStark (OH), Arts & Business Alliance of Eugene (OR), ArtsWave (OH), Arts & Business Council of Miami (FL), and the Boulder Chamber of Commerce (CO). Additional information was gathered from the websites of local arts agencies for the CreativeXchange program of the Arts + Business Council of Greater Philadelphia, the Art x Tech Challenge of ArtsWave, Arts After Hours of the Arts & Business Alliance of Eugene, and for the economic impact reports of ArtsFund and the Colorado Business Committee for the Arts.

# MORE AMERICANS FOR THE ARTS RESOURCES

## Articles and Blogs:

- pARTnership Movement news on [partnering with chambers of commerce](#)
- [How a Chamber of Commerce and Arts & Business Council Are Changing the Conversation](#) by Rob Wonderling of the Greater Philadelphia Chamber of Commerce
- [Hello Chamber...it's the Arts Calling](#) by Linda Woggon of Ohio Citizens for the Arts
- [Arts Groups Make Strong Chamber Allies](#), by Americans for the Arts and the Arts + Business Council of Greater Philadelphia for the Association of Chamber of Commerce Executives Magazine

## Research:

- [25 Highlights from Local Arts Agency Census 2015](#)
- [Arts & Economic Prosperity IV Report](#)
- [Creative Industries Reports](#)

## Tool-Kits:

- [Building Partnerships on Your Own](#)
- [Business Speak](#)

Want more information about business support of the arts? Read the [BCA Survey of Business Support for the Arts](#). To learn more about private sector partnerships with the arts, visit the [pARTnership Movement](#), an initiative from [Americans for the Arts](#) designed to reach business leaders with the message that partnering with the arts can build their competitive advantage.

