COMMUNICATION BREAKDOWN

A Recommendation Report for The Arts Partnership

by

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An Applied Project Presented in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Science

Approved November 2018 by the
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ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY
December 2018

Executive Summary

The Arts Partnership is experiencing a communication breakdown dilemma, similar to what other non-profits around the country are facing:

> How can they break through the noise and build a relationship with users on the other side of the screen?

This challenge is exacerbated by the overwhelming amount of email its subscribers receive – email is cheap and easy, and therefore a logical method for communicating with interested parties en masse. But because so many people are receiving so many emails, as an email sender, it can sometimes feel as if you are shouting into a void and left wondering if anyone is actually hearing you.

Currently, The Arts Partnership is experiencing higher-than-average open and click-through rates, but that doesn't mean that there is no room left to grow. The recommendations in this report were formed through multiple research channels, including a thorough review of the available subject research, an online survey of The Arts Partnership's current email subscribers, thematic coding of several months of The Arts Partnership's flagship "Connecting the Dots" weekly e-newsletters, and an analysis of the top-clicked links and their corresponding codes. A brief summary of each method follows.

Research Findings

While the trends may be that the future of digital rests within the social media realm (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, etc.), there is still evidence that the impact of email is just as strong as ever. A recent survey conducted by Ipsos found that 85% of digitally connected consumers report using email, and that 28% check their email every hour.

While email use is still prevalent, the key is breaking through the noise and getting subscribers to actually open their email, and that responsibility belongs to the subject line.

The subscriber survey indicated that current subscribers are very satisfied with the weekly "Connecting the Dots" e-newsletter, and that they prefer clicking on text-based links over image-based links. Subscribers also want to see information on visual arts events and exhibits more than any other subject, though the results were fairly evenly spread.

The data coding and resulting top-clicked link analysis showed that while users clicked on events related to visual arts, the vast majority of top-clicked links were for application deadlines – appeasing to artists themselves, and not necessarily arts patrons.

Recommendations

There are seven easy-to-implement recommendations in this report, including:

- Changing the subject lines to represent the "candy" of the e-newsletter
- Maintaining the email list to eliminate people who don't open e-newsletters
- Reducing HTML and extraneous links to help avoid SPAM filters
- Creating a "welcome" series of email to build early trust with new subscribers
- Design emails for both desktops and smartphones, as the future is mobile

Conclusion

The Arts Partnership's "Connecting the Dots" e-newsletter is performing well, and the team should be very proud of its work thus far. In implementing these recommendations, it will be able to break through the noise of all the other email clutter and truly build a trusting relationship with users on the other side of the screen.

To my friend Melissa: Thank you for keeping me grounded when my head was in the clouds and giving me wings when I was drowning. Couldn't have done this without you.

List of Figures

Figure 1: The Arts Partnership "Connecting the Dots" open and click rates 3

Figure 2: Trendline of the 25 most recent email campaigns 4

Figure 3: Email is still popular among digital consumers. 6

Figure 4: Snip of July 19, 2018 email with code stripe 16

Figure 5: Heat map of click locations from survey 20

Figure 6 Breakdown of survey responses 21

Figure 7: Word cloud of the top-clicked codes 22

Contents

Executive Summary i
Research Findings i
Recommendations ii
Conclusion ii
List of Figures iv
Introduction 1
Definitions 2
Review of the Literature 5
Email: The Basics 5
Subject Lines, Open Rates and Click-Through Rates 10
Methodology 12
Survey 13
Data Coding 15
Connecting the Dots in the "Connecting the Dots" E-newsletters 17
Results and Discussion 18
Survey Data 18
Data Coding and Click-Through Analysis 21
Recommendation 1: Limit Links to Article Headlines 23
Recommendation 2: Keep it Scannable 24
Recommendation 3: Maintain the Email List 25
Recommendation 4: Use Your Manners 26
Recommendation 5: The Future is Mobile 27
Recommendation 6: Change Up the Subject Lines 28
Recommendation 7: Consider a New Email Program 29
Conclusion 30
References 31
APPENDIX A 36
APPENDIX B 37

Introduction

Email is an inexpensive and easy method of communication, with a high return on investment (Morrison, 2012). As such, many non-profit organizations send mass emails to quickly keep their email subscribers educated about upcoming events, promotions, how to get involved, and ways to support the organizations.

Email users, on the other hand, find themselves facing email overload and sometimes simply choose to bulk delete emails or unsubscribe from organizations' emails instead of opening, reading, and engaging with a particular email. A 2012 report by email marketing company Constant Contact showed that 69% of people unsubscribe from email marketing campaigns because they received "too many emails from the business/non-profit" (Charest, 2012). Entire companies, such as unroll.me (https://unroll.me/) are dedicated to helping email users unsubscribe from email marketing campaigns in one easy click.

The dilemma for a non-profit is this:

> How can we break through the noise and build a relationship with users on the other side of the screen?

To answer this question, I examined the email marketing campaigns of The Arts Partnership, an arts-focused non-profit in the Fargo, North Dakota/Moorhead, Minnesota area, focusing on its weekly "Connecting the Dots" e-newsletter. The Arts Partnership, like many non-profit organizations, finds itself in a digital rut. It wants to better engage its current

subscribers (a mix of donors, artists, volunteers, and interested community members), as well as grow its subscriber base, but with a staff of three women, it doesn't have the time to redesign its email marketing strategy alone. Its challenge is familiar to many in non-profit leadership; author Kivi Leroux Miller (2010) writes that the largest sticking point for non-profit marketing is no longer a lack of money and staff to carry out the initiatives, it is time.

To help The Arts Partnership better understand its newsletters, I will attempt to answer the following three research questions:

- Are art patrons more likely to interact with the e-newsletter than artists?
- Are subscribers more likely to click on an image-based link or a text-based link?
- Are subscribers looking for event information more frequently than other articles?

Understanding the answers to these questions and implementing the associated recommendations into its email marketing campaigns can help The Arts Partnership – and other non-profits facing similar challenges – engage with and grow its numbers of subscribers, volunteers, and donors. While this research focused on the email marketing strategy of one non-profit organization, these recommendations may be transferrable to organizations outside the non-profit realm, and can help anyone engaging in email marketing realize better results and a better return on investment.

Definitions

To assist readers in understanding this recommendation report, the following definitions are from email provider Constant Contact: (2018e), (2018d), (2018f), (2018c)

- Bounce: an email that doesn't make it into the recipient's inbox

- Click-Through Rate: the percentage that shows the number of times links are clicked in the individual email
- Emoji: a universal set of "pictorial representations" of objects, emotions and actions that recipients can understand; ☂ is an umbrella, regardless of language
- Open Rate: the percentage of unique recipients who opened the email divided by the total number of emails successfully sent (does not include bounced emails)
- Subscriber: A member of the organization's mailing list
- SPAM: An email the recipient does not want

Current State

The current open rate of The Arts Partnership's "Connecting the Dots" e-newsletter is around 29%, with a mean click-through rate of 17% sent between January 1, 2016 – September 6, 2018 (Constant Contact, 2018a). (Fig. 1)

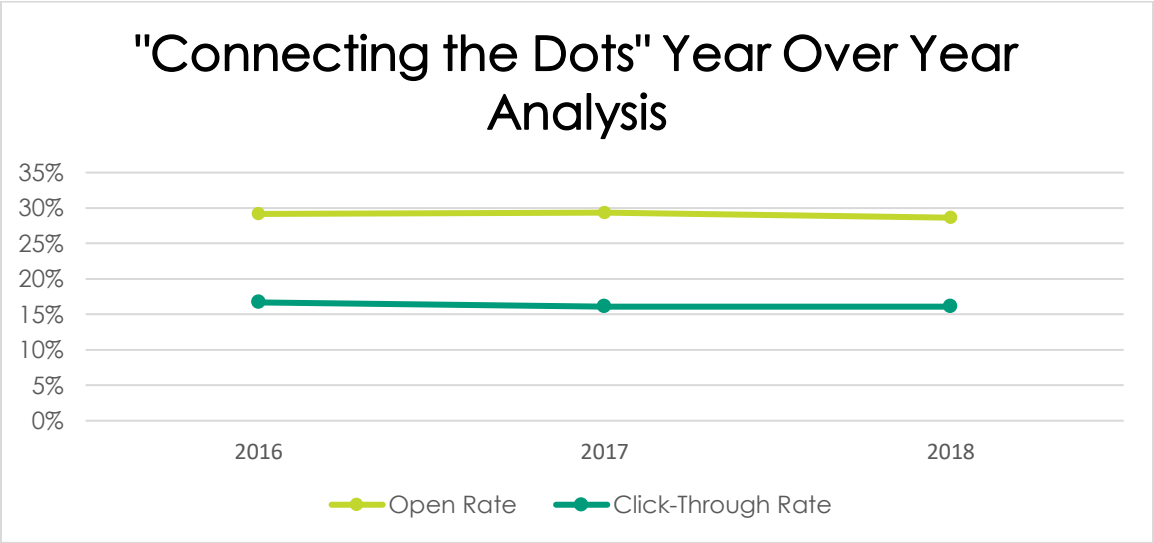

Figure 1 The Arts Partnership "Connecting the Dots" open and click rates, January 1, 2016 – September 6, 2018

While these numbers are higher than the industry standards for non-profits of a 21% open rate and an 8% click-through rate, (Constant Contact, 2018b) the numbers are stagnant and represent a major challenge that The Arts Partnership faces – its most recognizable and consistent email campaign, the "Connecting the Dots" weekly e-newsletter, performs poorly, in comparison to its most recent non-"Connecting the Dots" email which had a 73% open rate (Fig. 2).

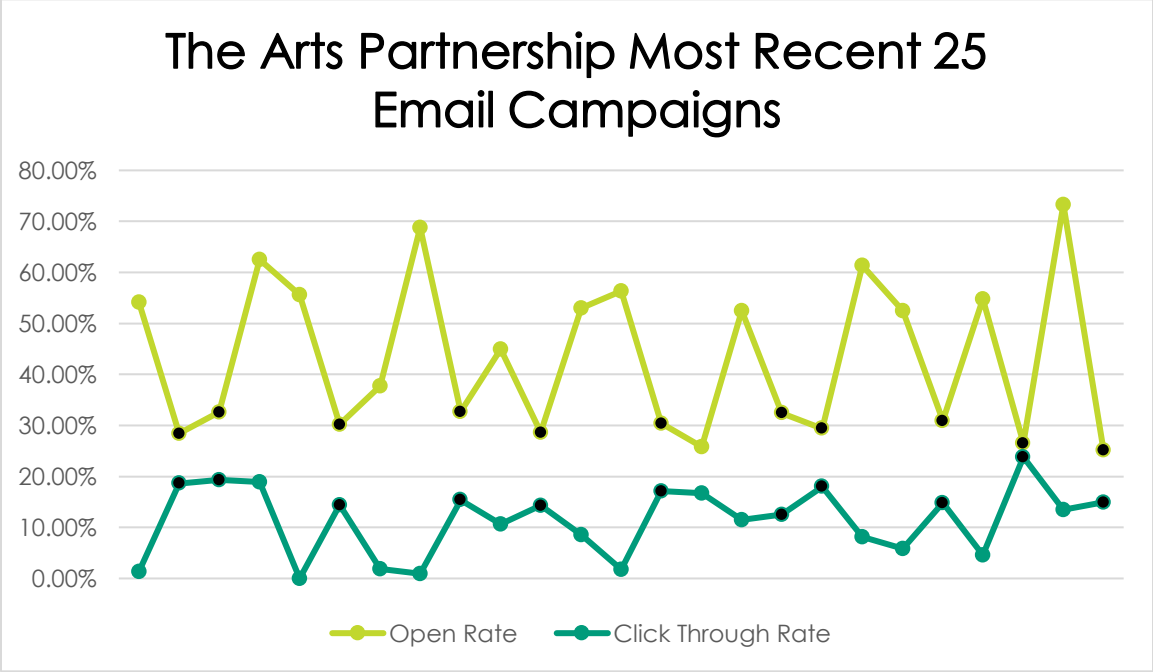

Figure 2 Trendline of the 25 most recent email campaigns sent to over 100 subscribers. For privacy purposes, the names of the individual campaigns have been removed. The black dots are "Connecting the Dots" e-newsletters.

Though designed for a corporate marketing strategy, Ascend2's 2016 marketing trends survey indicates The Arts Partnership's digital goals are similar to those of comparable organizations and corporations. The report stated that 57% of respondents ranked "Increasing sales revenue" and 56% of respondents ranked "Lead generation" as the top

goals in their digital technology strategy (Ascend2, 2017). Translating those into non-profit terms: 57% would rank "increasing donations" and 56% would rank "increasing subscriber base" as their top goals.

Review of the Literature

For a subject as omnipresent as email, surprisingly little has been written and studied on the subject. The current study is informed by a review of literature regarding email usage overall, subject line analyses, and open and click-through rates.

Email: The Basics

Yahoo Tech columnist David Pogue asks the following question in a 2015 edition of *Scientific American*: "Once heralded as the death of the personal human touch, e-mail has now taken over the letter's place as a ubiquitous form of communication—both business and personal. But is its day in the digital sun coming to a close?" (Pogue, 2015) While the numbers may scare the die-hard email enthusiasts, (the total volume has dropped about 10 percent since 2010, among those pesky millennials email usage has dropped 18%, about 60% for today's Generation Z teens), Pogue reassures us that email is still alive and thriving, and that the same panic nearly overtook the still-quite-alive US Postal Service (ironically, as email was beginning its ascent).

Thomas Siegert-Ridley (2016) finds that though the technology is nearing its fourth decade, (Left, 2002) its use is as strong as ever. Using email, according to Ipsos, is a near universal habit with 85% of digitally connected consumers using the channel (n= 19,216) (Ipsos,

2012). This breaks down to 6% of consumers checking their email every 5 minutes, 12% checking every 15 minutes and 28% checking every hour. (Fig. 3)

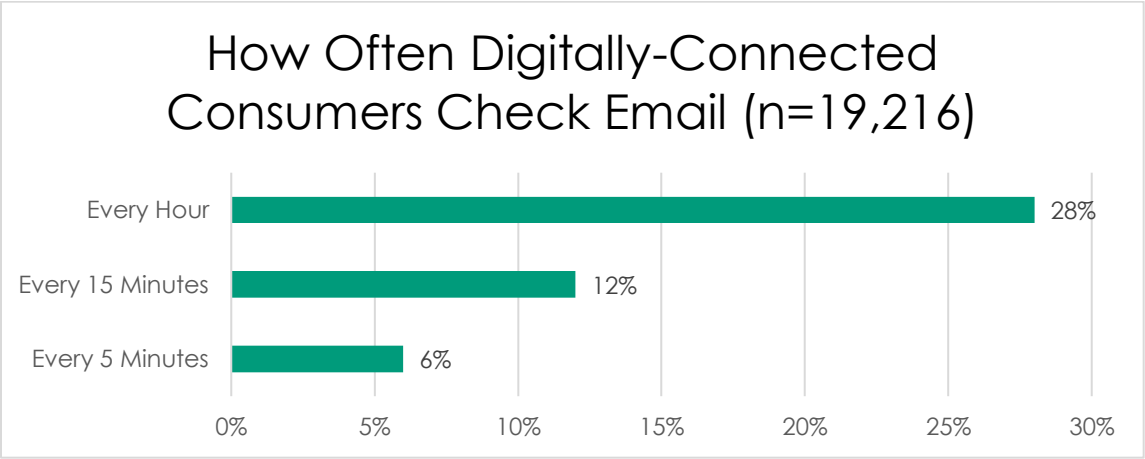

Figure 3 Email is still popular among digital consumers

M+R Benchmarks disagrees with Siegert's findings. Their recent benchmarking study found that while email lists grew by 11% in 2017, both open and click-through rates declined dramatically (1% and 6%, respectively). This bring the average click-through rate to below one half of one percent (M+R Benchmarks, 2018).

While it is safe to assume that nearly every American has heard of email and that most people have at least one email address, the literature around email is limited at best. It seems that we are still learning "how" to email in various regards – particularly "how" to create e-newsletters for organizations. One such article (Bramble 2014) goes into instructions so basic as to advise the sender to "create a mailing list" of subscribers to whom the organization can send. If organizations are that far behind the times, it's not hard to understand why email open rates hover around 18% (Constant Contact, 2018b).

This back-to-basics strategy isn't limited to the corporate world, it spreads to the non-profit world as well. In May 2018, *Nonprofit Communications Report* ran an article with three tips for how to get email addresses for a e-newsletter (Stevenson, 2018). Kivi Leroux Miller (2010), author of *The Nonprofit Marketing Guide: High-Impact, Low-Cost Ways to Build Support for Your Good Cause* offers basic, but obviously needed, advice such as getting email addresses offline, such as having a sign-in sheet at events.

This is, of course, solid advice for a smart way to boost a brand. Elizabeth Mansfield writes that email marketing – including e-newsletters – is a very cost-effective and highly-quantifiable marketing tool, and provides five reasons why organizations should have an e-newsletter. Her reasons include its low cost, precise targeting to only the exact individuals and organization wants to see a particular message, measurable results, and the ability to attract and retain email subscribers (Mansfield, 2007).

Even the harbingers of communications – our journalists and media outlets – recognize the value of a regular e-newsletter. Rob Tornoe, in the November 2017 *Editor & Publisher*, reports on multiple news outlets that have highly-segmented e-newsletters and the impact they have had on the outlets' communication strategy. He calls e-newsletters an "outdated artifact" but recognizes that as the success of social media platforms hasn't been as predicted, e-newsletters are "the new darling of the media world" (Tornoe, 2017). Mary Clare Jalonick agrees. In politics, email communication has been a tenant of a successful campaigns for nearly two decades. A major reason for that is relatively low cost of emails (Jalonick, 2001).

But it isn't as if an organization can decide to start randomly emailing groups of people and expect any sort of positive result – as with almost all things, building an email relationship

can take time and involves building trust between the parties. Hsin Hsin Chang, Hamid Rizal, and Hanudin Amin (2013) found that a key difference between being considered a legitimate email sender and a spammer is trust, and that it is the trustworthiness of the person or organization sending an email is the top consideration for consumers choosing to opt-in to receive email from a source. Connie Reichelsdorfer, Executive Director of Zero Waste Canada and author of *Email Marketing 501: Advanced Analytics for Nonprofits and Small Businesses* (2018), agrees with the researchers, and succinctly writes: "A user's trust is the most valuable asset; treat it that way."

"A user's trust is the most valuable asset; treat it that way."

Cultivating that trust is not only a way to get subscribers to open emails, it is positively correlated with successful fundraising. To see this in action, we need to look no further than the record-setting Obama for America [OFA] online giving numbers. In the 2012 cycle, OFA raised $690 million in online contributions, the vast majority coming as a result of a robust email program (Sutton, 2013). While their scale will likely be something most non-profits will never be able to match (they had twenty digital writers on staff, for example), they followed the basic rules of email marketing – segmenting users based on behavior and targeting content appropriately, and testing every day. They also implemented a new strategy – offering quick links to resolicit contributions, which came pre-populated for certain contribution amounts.

The result was a 300% increase in conversions (people who converted from email recipient to donor). The pre-populated links made it so easy for donors to contribute again that it

almost took all the work out of contributing. Toby Fallsgraff, the former Director of Email for OFA, predicted as other future campaigns learned of the significant boost these quick links provided, more would implement them. He was correct – nearly every political campaign uses some form of quick links.

The impact of mobile and wireless technology on email marketing cannot be understated. CTIA [formerly known as the Cellular Telecommunications and Internet Association], the organization lobbying for the U.S. wireless communications industry and companies, found in its 2018 report that Americans used a record 15 trillion megabytes of mobile data in 2017. This number was nearly quadruple the amount of mobile data used in 2014 and 40 times what was used in 2010. They equated this to "nearly 250 million people simultaneously binge-watching every episode of Game of Thrones in HD" on mobile devices (CTIA, 2018b). It doesn't appear that mobile data usage is going to decline anytime soon.

CTIA also found in its 2018 report that there are 273,000,000 smartphones in active use in America, an increase of 4% since 2016 and 5.5 times higher than the number in 2009 (CTIA, 2018a). It is becoming increasingly imperative that organizations like The Arts Partnership ensure they are creative mobile-responsive communicators.

Similarly, Pew Research Center found that 95% of Americans own a cell phone of some sort, and that 77% own smartphones (2018). While millennials still lead the way in terms of adoption and use of technology (92% own smartphones), Gen X (aged 38-53), Baby Boomers (aged 54-72) are catching up, with 85% and 67% owning smartphones, respectively. The ways they use their smartphones is important for our research: 28% of millennials are smartphone-only internet users (they own a smartphone but do not have traditional Internet service at their home), while 18% of Gen Xers and 13% of Baby

Boomers, and a mere 8% of members of the Silent Generation (aged 73-90) are also in wireless-only users (Jiang, 2018).

The Centers for Disease Control publishes biannual reports on the state of connectiveness in American households, focusing on how many homes are wireless-only (no landlines). Not surprisingly, the latest report finds that 72% of renters live in wireless-only homes, as compared with 45% of homeowners. Overall, they found that 54% of American homes were wireless only, an increase of 3% since their 2016 second-half report (Blumberg, 2017). It is clear that wireless phones aren't going anywhere.

Subject Lines, Open Rates and Click-Through Rates

According to Kivi Leroux Miller's clever analogy, the subject line should be used to give readers a sneak peek at all the good stuff inside the actual email; it should describe the candy, not the wrapper (2010). Jesse Harriott, chief analytics officer for Constant Contact, found that 47% of email recipients decide to open an email based on the subject line (Pophal, 2015). This makes sense, as there are generally two reasons someone would open an email:

- The subject line is interesting to the recipient
- The sender is interesting to the recipient (and as we learned above, trusted by the recipient)

Miller and Charles (2016) found that email recipients have psychological responses to email subject lines, and those responses determine their likelihood to open said email. The authors borrow from the field of sentiment analysis and its seven types of analysis, categorizing these into three top-level categories: semantic analysis, descriptive analysis, and observational analysis. While their semantic emotional analysis focuses partially on nine emotions based

the Indian aesthetics, the descriptive analysis and observational analysis examined the structure of the subject line itself, including impact of certain words and the number of words in the subject line.

Harriott agreed that the number of words in a subject line matters, and advises to "Figure out what you want the reader to do when they open your email, and craft the subject line from there" (Pophal, 2015).

Alison Miller, Dr. Alex Rothman, and Richie Lenne (2018) studied how students at the University of Minnesota responded to emails with the following subjects:

- A "gain" and a direct call-to-action ("Feel more under control - Schedule a Stress Check-In")
- A "non-loss" and a direct call-to-action ("Avoid feeling out of control - Schedule a Stress Check-In")
- Only a call-to-action ("Schedule a Stress Check-In") in the subject line

The researchers found that emails with only a call-to-action were opened nearly 2% more than emails with either frame.

Researchers Biloša, Turkaljb, and Ivan Kelićc (2016), writing for Croatian journal *Market (Tržište)*, ran several experiments over four years testing variables including sending time, sending day, sender's name, and subject line (generic vs. specific, and inclusion of special characters such as emoticons). Among their findings, their research revealed that generic subject lines performed better than specific subject lines.

The Croatian research team also found that including special characters such as emoticons in the subject line did not show a statistically significant difference in open rates.

Dave Koder, owner of D Koder Marketing in Bath, Pennsylvania, disagrees with the Croatian team. His research, as reported by the Lehigh Valley Business, found that there "is a 30 percent increase in open rate [for email newsletters] just by using emojis."

Andrew Warner with Cheetah Digital agrees that including emojis in email subject lines can increase email open rates (2013). In his research, 56% of the brands he works with saw a net increase in email open rates when the email subject lines contained an emoji. He also found that email subject lines which included the ☂ umbrella emoji saw an increase in unique open rates of 50%. He cautions, however, that the emojis must make sense for the subject line itself (for The Arts Partnership, unless it was promoting a production of Singin' in the Rain, using the umbrella emoji would make less sense to its audience than using a 😺 cat emoji for a production of the Andrew Lloyd Webber musical Cats).

Kumar and Salo (2016) studied the connection between location of links in an email newsletter and the performance of those links (as measured by the click-through rate). They found that users clicked on links in emails in a "U" shape - starting at the upper left corner, working their way down and then back up the right side. Thus, links in the upper left corner experience a higher click-through rate than links at the bottom of the email or at the upper right corner.

Methodology

The original research components for this recommendation report consists of the following research methods:

- A survey of current recipients of The Arts Partnership's "Connecting the Dots" weekly e-newsletter
- A qualitative analysis of the past three months of "Connecting the Dots" weekly e-newsletters, studying the occurrences and co-occurrences of themes related to various types of articles and events using a detailed coding book in MAXQDA (coding software program)
- An examination of the user behavior reports for the past three months of "Connecting the Dots" e-newsletters and the results of the above qualitative analysis

Survey

From October 4 – November 16, 2018, I conducted an online survey of the 2,280 unique subscribers to The Arts Partnership "Connecting the Dots" weekly e-newsletter. This survey was created using Qualtrics and distributed both in the weekly e-newsletter and via an independent email on October 16. I designed the survey to focus on qualitative data to learn about their preferences and what are seeking from The Arts Partnership. As this survey was specifically to determine the behavior of The Arts Partnership email recipients, I did not conduct a formal search for participants – I had easy access to them through The Arts Partnership's chosen "blast" email provider, Constant Contact.

The survey itself consisted of 15 total questions: 1 question for the acceptance of the informed consent agreement at the front of the survey, and 14 total email behavior questions. Not all potential respondents answered every question, as I included skip logic to the survey. Skip logic is the "branching of questions/responses that occurs when specific questions are answered in certain ways," according to Pete Rotella and Sunita Chulani of Cisco Systems, Inc. (2012). This allowed me to divide respondents into "subscribers" and "non-subscribers" and tailor my questions to their particular group. For example, if someone

said they had unsubscribed, they were taken to a series of questions about the content they would like to see in the newsletter, and if they would re-subscribe to get that content again. If someone was a current subscriber, they were then taken to a series of questions about how they interact with the newsletter.

This branching prevents users from seeing questions that are irrelevant to them. As online survey provider SurveyMonkey describes it, asking a question that is irrelevant to the participant "will usually result in the respondent giving a random answer—or getting frustrated and closing the survey altogether." (SurveyMonkey, n.d.). The two other reasons why SurveyMonkey recommends using skip logic include helping keep the survey shorter by eliminating unnecessary questions and helping keep the survey more like a conversation between researcher and participant.

Questions in the survey ranged from specific questions to better understand how often they open the newsletter, how often they click on links, and two questions to understand where in an article they would click to activate a link (out of three possible options). Subscribers were also asked what content they want to see in the newsletter itself. While not specifically requested in the survey itself, I did receive testimonial feedback from one email subscriber regarding the accessibility to persons with disabilities to both attend The Arts Partnership partner events, as well as to interact with the e-newsletter itself. To incentivize and increase the survey response rate, The Arts Partnership is providing a pair of tickets to an upcoming partner event, with all participants eligible to win.

Data Coding

The Arts-Partnership e-newsletters are sent to their subscriber list around 3:00 p.m. Central on Thursdays. For purposes of this report, I analyzed three months of The Arts Partnership "Connecting the Dots" emails from July – September 2018.

To understand patterns in the content of the e-newsletter, I created a detailed code book using MAXQDA qualitative data analysis software. The full code book is located at Appendix A, but highlights include coding text-based links and image-based links separately, each type of event The Arts Partnership publicizes (art exhibits, musical performances, theater performances), and if these were The Arts Partnership-sponsored events, partner events, or housekeeping items. (Fig. 4)

Figure 4 Snip of July 19, 2018 email with code stripe

As I became a subscriber to The Arts Partnership emails in the spring, I was familiar with the general structure of the e-newsletters and the types of events they include, however I used open coding (codes based upon observations of the data, not a priori codes) as I wanted to let the data determine the codes and reduce the chance of bringing my biases into the research (Hughes & Hayhoe, 2008). For this same reason I did not open any of the links during my research phase (I did open links and engage with the e-newsletter prior to the formal research phase, as articles appealed to me as a subscriber). This process was conducted in several rounds of coding:

- Round 1: Coded the types of art or arts-related event in each article
- Round 2: Identified the partner events, located on the right side of the e-newsletter

- Round 3: Added codes based upon the type of link each article contained
- Round 4: Re-coded the "Housekeeping" and "Misc." articles to clarify

In early rounds of coding, if I couldn't clearly understand the purpose or the article from the information that appeared directly in the e-newsletter, or if the event did not seem like it would fit a code category (a canoe parade in the September 20 edition, for example), it was labeled with the "Misc." code for miscellaneous events. Similarly, items of a "business" purpose (deadlines, staff vacation days, etc.) were coded with "Housekeeping". These were clarified in the final round of coding, based upon the results of analyzing the top-clicked links and what codes those linked articles contained.

Connecting the Dots in the "Connecting the Dots" E-newsletters

One of the many benefits of using a "blast" email program such as Constant Contact over using Outlook or Gmail is the inclusion of analytics and data about the individual email campaigns, and the larger overall campaign. One of the main data points Constant Contact tracks are email campaign click-through rates.

The click-through rate is a verifiable metric for measuring engagement, as the email recipient must physically click on a link to perform an action (a document opening, a new web page opening). While this measures engagement with a particular email, click-through rates, and opens rates are linked – someone can't click on links in an email that they haven't opened. For this part of the research, I looked at each of the "Connecting the Dots" e-newsletters from July – September 2018 and identified the five top-clicked links for each email.

To understand how the results of the qualitative study correlates to the content of the e-newsletters, I compared the codes from my analysis with the top five most-clicked links in

each e-newsletter to determine if their subscribers click certain types of content more often than others. It was through an initial round of analysis that I determined I needed to conduct the fourth and final round of coding to narrow the codes of "Misc." and "Housekeeping".

Results and Discussion

Survey Data

From October 4 – November 16, 2018, I collected 134 survey responses, out of a possible 2,280 (the highest number of subscribers during the survey period). This results in a 6% response rate – far too low to garner truly representative results of the target population, but enough for a descriptive analysis[1].

I do not believe this low response rate is indicative of a significant nonresponse bias. When the number of survey responses is compared to the average of the 539 subscribers who opened the emails, the response rate climbs to 25%. Three of the four emails which included a link to the survey were part of the weekly "Connecting the Dots" e-newsletter series, with nothing in the subject line to indicate there was a survey inside. Therefore, the response rate from those emails is directly correlated to the open rate for each of those emails. For the one separate email, a full 26% of people who opened the email clicked on the link to take the survey. Furthermore, at the close of the survey there were zero "in progress" surveys, indicating that participants did not encounter any barriers to completion.

[1] What is a good response rate? That depends on who you ask. Earl Babbie (2011) argues that there is no "absolutely acceptable" response rate besides 100%, but Manfreda, Berzelak, Vehovar, Bosnjak, and Haas found that web survey response rates tend to be 11% lower compared to other survey modes such as mail, telephone, fax, IVR, and touch tone entry, making the 100% goal likely impossible for anyone conducting surveys online (2008).

Overall, those The Arts Partnership subscribers who responded to the survey hold positive views of the weekly "Connecting the Dots" e-newsletters, with 81% of respondents reporting being "extremely satisfied" or "somewhat satisfied" with the newsletters. This is an important number to understand, especially in light of The Arts Partnership's open rates being higher than industry standards, as it shows that The Arts Partnership is currently running a successful email program and is providing its subscribers with the information they seek.

The survey included two separate questions asking respondents where on a particular article they would click to learn more information about the subject of the article. Each article included three options – clicking on the text-based headline, clicking on the article header image, or clicking on the "read more" link, and participants who clicked outside of those three options were recorded as "other." In each of the two questions, respondents indicated that they were significantly more likely to click on the article headline (50%) than on the accompanying header image (11%), the "read more" link (36%), or anywhere else in the article, even if it was not a link (3%). A heat map representation of the results for one of the questions is below. (Fig. 5)

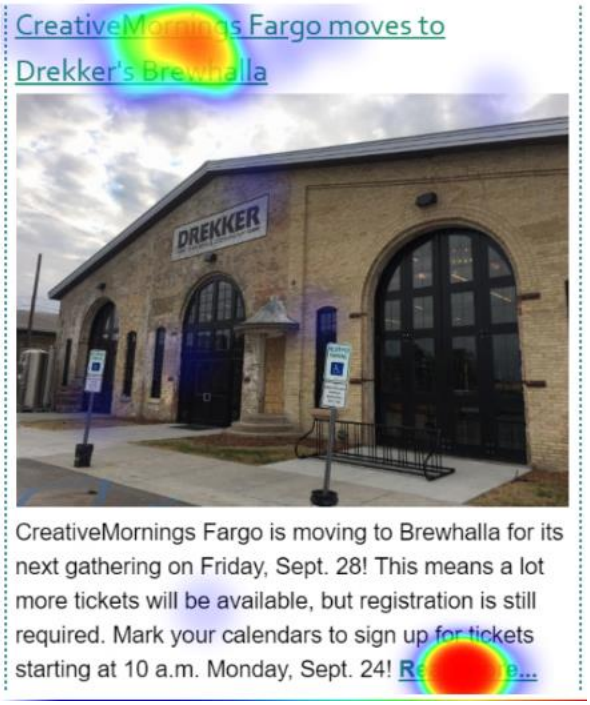

Figure 5 Heat map of click locations from survey

As to the question of whether subscribers are more likely to click on an image-based link or a text-based link? When subscribers are presented with the option of clicking on an image-based link or a text-based link, 86% of participants chose a text-based link.

Finally, when asked what content subscribers are looking for from The Arts Partnership's "Connecting the Dots" e-newsletters, the results were fairly evenly spread among the given responses. Not surprisingly, the largest number of respondents, 13%, said they wanted to see visual events, which ranked as the top-clicked link more than any other code.

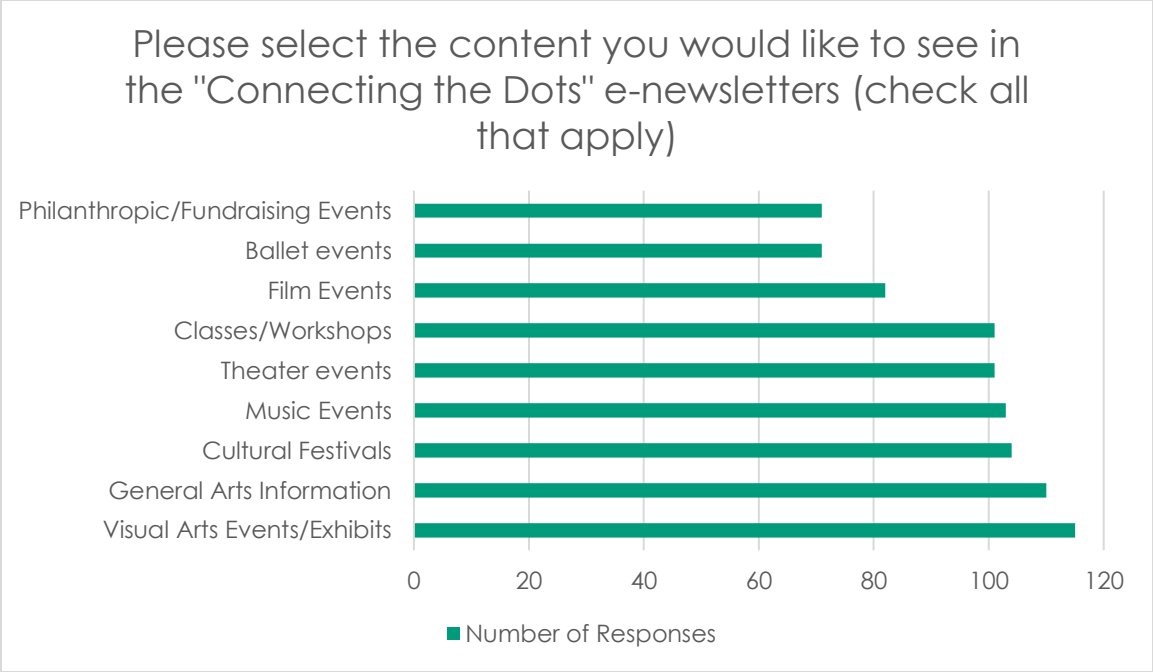

Figure 6 Breakdown of survey responses

As to the question of whether subscribers looking for event information more than other articles? The answer is unclear**.** While the number of subscribers requesting information on events is certainly high, the second highest response is "General Arts Information", which has no indication of being an event-based response.

Data Coding and Click-Through Analysis

The data coding provided an interesting look into how the subscribers interact with various types of articles within each edition of the e-newsletter.

There are six main categories of codes in the code book: Partner Events (pertaining to the calendar of events on the right side of the e-newsletter), Types of Art, Event Type, Housekeeping, Dayna Column, and Advertising.

It became clear after the initial rounds of analysis that the "Housekeeping" and "Misc." codes were too broad, as they formed three of the five modes when comparing the link ranking across all emails (looking at all top-clicked links, then all second top-clicked links). As described above, these codes were then re-coded and clarified. All results discussed moving forward are the result of that final round of coding. A visual representation of the top-clicked codes is below. (Fig. 7)

Figure 7 Word cloud of the top-clicked codes

While the mode (the code occurring most often) for the top-clicked link (Visual) was not surprising, particularly when looking at "Connecting the Dots" e-newsletters around the sponsored ChalkFest event in early August, the mode for the remaining four top-clicked links (Submission/Application Deadline) was not what I expected. These deadlines, and the articles they are part of, are all targeted toward artists themselves, not necessarily patrons of the arts as in the rest of the newsletters. (Table 1)

Modes of Top-Clicked Codes		
Rank	Code	Times Code Appeared in Rank
Top-Clicked Link	Visual	3
2nd Most Clicked Link	Submission/Application Deadline	3
3rd Most Clicked Link	Submission/Application Deadline	5
4th Most Clicked Link	Submission/Application Deadline	7
5th Most Clicked Link	Submission/Application Deadline	6

Table 1 Display table of the mode of the codes in the five most top-clicked links, from July - September 2018

So, are art patrons more likely to engage with the e-newsletter than artists? No. Arts patrons aren't interacting with the e-newsletter as much as artists are – patrons would have no need to learn about specific submission or application deadlines, as these apply only to artist who are seeking opportunities to showcase their work.

Recommendation 1: Limit Links to Article Headlines

Jonathan Brink, vice president of product at LiveHive, which provides sales automation tools for email marketers, advises "The shorter the email, the better" (Shacklett, 2017). He also cautions against using too many links in one email, stating that links and HTML can be a warning to an Email Service Provider such as Gmail, Hotmail or Yahoo! that the email may be SPAM. From the survey results, it is clear that the subscribers are not interested in clicking on image-based links, and preferred to click on the headlines over the "read more" links.

Eliminating the image-based link and the "read more" links from each article will dramatically reduce the amount of HTML present in each email, potentially increasing its deliverability.

Recommendation 1: Eliminate HTML-based SPAM triggers by removing links to article, except from the headline.

Recommendation 2: Keep it Scannable

Former PC Magazine columnist Jesse Berst provides a list of eight "secrets" to writing a "winning" e-newsletter, with tips including writing and formatting for scannability (a tenant of all technical communication writing) (Berst, 2000). While making an email scannable but limiting the amount of links may seem like a contradiction, having a strong website (which The Arts Partnership recently updated) where the information in the links can live is an excellent way to still display information but include only one link to the website instead of several individual links. An excellent example of where this can occur is with the left-side calendar of events. Instead of having an individual link to each event's write-up on the website, have one link that goes to one page with all the upcoming events for that week.

Recommendation 2: Eliminate multiple event links to multiple pages; instead, include one link to an "upcoming events" page.

Recommendation 3: Maintain the Email List

One of the most important actions The Arts Partnership can take is to properly maintain its email list. There is no reason to keep email addresses on its list if they are inactive – it is a waste of time, resources, and money, especially for organizations who use for-pay "blast" email programs such as MailChimp, Constant Contact, or one of the myriad other programs. Brett Schenker, email deliverability specialist with EveryAction, states, "Too often, nonprofits look simply at the raw numbers—at 'growing the list'—when they should be focusing instead on the quality of that list. It's worth investing the money to do it right" (King, 2016).

> Recommendation 3: Don't focus on growing the list until you improve the quality of the list. It's worth investing the money – and time – do to it right.

According to Schenker, (Schenker, 2018) if an Email Service Provider (Gmail, Yahoo!, Hotmail) sees a pattern in an organization's emails where they are often marked as SPAM by the recipient, the ESP may begin automatically moving emails from that sender into SPAM folders. What's scarier for a non-profit – or any organization that sends emails – is that emails that are not opened may also start finding their way into SPAM folders, thanks to the ESP linking unread emails to SPAM complaints. This can result in the sender being permanently blocked by the ESP, often without the senders' knowledge.

Recommendation 4: Use Your Manners

Schenker also advises several techniques to avoid the SPAM trap, including getting new subscribers off on the right foot by instituting a series of welcome emails. Stephanie Colleton of Return Path, an email marketing company, expands on Schenker's recommendations about a series of welcome emails. Her research found that senders can predict future behavior simply by understanding how new subscribers respond to the emails in the welcome series – it "sets the stage for your relationship with your subscriber." (Colleton, 2015). According to Colleton, "People who read all three messages [in a welcome series] read 69% of the brands' email going forward; people who read none continued to ignore the brand's messages, reading only 5% [of future emails]." For email senders – it's like being able to see into the future.

Recommendation 4: Create an automated series of "welcome" emails to let your subscribers know what to expect and make them feel like part of the team.

Dufrene, Engelland, and Lehman (2005) provide a list of "rules" that email marketers should follow. These rules include sending confirmations messages to opt-in requests as quickly as possible. These "welcome" emails help create a positive image of the brand from the beginning, and set the tone for the interactions to follow and begin to build the most important aspect in all marketing – trust.

Recommendation 5: The Future is Mobile

What is clear from the literature is that The Arts Partnership needs to continue its focus on ensuring its e-newsletter (and all its emails) are responsive and designed to perform on mobile devices. Both Kaila Garrison, the former head of product marketing at Oracle Responsys and Justin Foster, cofounder and vice president of market development at Liveclicker agree. Foster argues that is it vital for senders to understand and respond to the devices upon which its recipients view the emails (Del Rowe, 2016). Just as vital then, naturally, is for the sender to use a program which allows them to track this information, and to tailor the emails to those platforms (even if that means sending multiple versions of the "same" email). A simple way to do this is to send a test of the email to team members with various devices to ensure each email appears and performs correctly on each type of device.

Recommendation 5: Keep up the focus on ensuring each e-newsletter is mobile-friendly; don't simply rely on Constant Contact to do it for you. Test on as many devices as possible.

Researchers Bawm and Nath (2014) studied the effects on targeting and segmentation on email open and click-through rates. They found increased performance when sending emails to subscribers segmented by their individual interest as opposed to generic, one-size-fits-all email campaigns.

Recommendation 6: Change Up the Subject Lines

On subject lines, Harriott recommends keeping subject lines to approximately 30 characters, and found that framing the subject line as a question piqued subscribers' interest. He also advises keeping the overall purpose and goal of the email in mind when writing the subject line. Kivi Laroux Miller posits on subject line length, as well, suggesting keeping the subject line around 35 characters, but notes that as with so many other things around email, the key is to test and see what works best for the unique audience to which The Arts Partnership is sending emails. Miller also advises to change the subject line between additions, and she doesn't mean just update the edition number. Each e-newsletter should be its own unique entity. She cautions however, not to put calls to action in the subject line, but instead to rephrase it as something inviting (Where to Dance All Night with Your Best Friends" versus "Register for Our All - Night Dance-a-thon Fundraiser) (2010).

> Recommendation 6: Use the subject line as a candy wrapper – give readers a sneak peek of what's inside.

For example, almost every "Connecting the Dots" e-newsletter features submission deadlines, and as learned from the analysis of the top-clicked links, nearly all the top-clicked links are for submission deadlines, it would be worthwhile to test a subject line around those deadlines. Example of subject lines highlighting an upcoming deadline for the July 26 e-newsletter could be "Show Off Your Art at Vinyl Taco" for the Vinyl Taco Fargo Record Art Project, or "Let Us Support Your Art" for The Arts Partnership-supported grant programs artists can apply for.

Similarly, in the e-newsletters where Dayna's column is featured, pull a quote or phrase from that article. In the September 27 e-newsletter, I recommend the subject line of "Imagine where we will go together" – a direct quote from Dayna's column. This has the dual benefit of grabbing subscribers' attention and encouraging them to open the email to see what the quote refers to, it also helps draw attention to Dayna's column.

Recommendation 7: Consider a New Email Program

While The Arts Partnership's chosen email program, Constant Contact, may work well for other organizations, its limited reporting analytics fails to provide detailed analytics outside of open rates, click-through rates, and types of devices used by subscribers, unless users pay more. For a non-profit, paying more to still get less isn't a viable option. Two of the major features which were important for this research is the ability to visualize through a heat map or simple diagram where on an email people are clicking the links (which would have allowed me to rely on actual user behavior instead of survey results to see if subscribers click on text-based or image-based links), and the lack of A/B testing for subject lines (which would have allowed me to easily research the impact subject line length has on open rates). Both of these were part of my initial research questions and would have generated significant discussion on original research, but were not able to be completed due to limitations of the email program.

Recommendation 7: Very strongly consider a more robust email program, such as MailChimp.

Conclusion

As mentioned previously, The Arts Partnership's "Connecting the Dots" e-newsletter is performing well, and the team should be very proud of its work thus far. The recommendations outlined above are relatively small ways to increase its open and click-through rates. By implementing these recommendations, The Arts Partnership will be able to better curate its content specifically for its subscribers and make more informed decisions about what to include to maximize subscriber engagement. In doing this, it will be able to break through the noise of all the other email clutter and truly build a trusting relationship with users on the other side of the screen.

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APPENDIX A

CODE BOOK AND DEFINITIONS

Submission/Application Deadlines

Image-based Link

Text-based Link

Partner Events

Types of Art

- Film
- Textural
- Exhibit
- Music
- Dance
- Theater
- Visual

Event

- Misc
- Culture
- Class/Workshop/Seminar/Lecture

Informative

Dayna Column

Art

Advertising

Housekeeping

APPENDIX B

SURVEY

Q1 I am a graduate student under the direction of Doctor Andrew Mara in the Department of Technical Communication at Arizona State University. I am conducting a research study to better understand what email content you are looking for from The Arts Partnership, so they can develop better e-newsletters.

I am inviting your participation, which will involve approximately four minutes of your time, for a brief survey on your interactions with and feelings about the above-described e-newsletters. You have the right not to answer any question, and to stop participation at any time.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you choose not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time, there will be no penalty.

By participating in this survey, you will be eligible to win two tickets to an upcoming The Arts Partnership partner event. Your participation will also help The Arts Partnership create better e-newsletters. There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts to your participation. You may decline to answer any or all questions and you may terminate your involvement at any time if you choose.

Your responses to this survey will be anonymous; please do not include identifying information on your survey responses. The results of this survey may be used in reports, presentations, or publications but your name will not be used.

If you have any questions concerning the research study, please contact the research team at: andrew.f.mara@asu.edu (Principal Investigator) or bpramme@asu.edu (Co-Investigator). If you have any questions about your rights as a subject/participant in this research, or if you feel you have been placed at risk, you can contact the Chair of the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board, through the ASU Office of Research Integrity and Assurance, at (480) 965-6788.

Do you agree to the terms stated above? By clicking Yes below, you consent that you are willing to answer the questions in this survey.

- ○ Yes, I agree
- ○ No, I do not agree

Skip To: End of Survey If Q1 = No, I do not agree

Q2 Do you currently subscribe to The Arts Partnership's weekly e-newsletter "Connecting the Dots"?

- ○ Yes, I currently subscribe to the weekly e-newsletter "Connecting the Dots"
- ○ No, I unsubscribed and no longer receive the weekly e-newsletter "Connecting the Dots"
- ○ I am unsure if I subscribe to the weekly e-newsletter "Connecting the Dots"

Skip To: Q9 If Q2 = No, I unsubscribed and no longer receive the weekly e-newsletter "Connecting the Dots"

Q3 How often do you open the weekly e-newsletter "Connecting the Dots"?

- ○ Every week (approx. 4 times/month)
- ○ Almost every week (approx. 2-3 times/month)
- ○ Rarely (approx. 1 time/month)
- ○ I do not open the weekly e-newsletter "Connecting the Dots"

Q5 How often do you click on links in the "Connecting the Dots" weekly e-newsletter?

- ○ Every week (approx. 4 times/month)
- ○ Almost every week (approx. 2-3 times/month)
- ○ Rarely (approx. 1 time/month)
- ○ I do not open the weekly e-newsletter "Connecting the Dots"

Q14 If you came across this in the "Connecting the Dots" weekly e-newsletter, where would you click or tap for more information about this group?

Photo by Samuel Thomas Claeys/Empathic Studio.

'Back to basics': Local bassist, composer Max Johnk assembles jazz quartet

Of all the different types of music local bassist Max Johnk has played in his life, jazz continues to be the primary genre shaping his artistic path. But the Fargo-Moorhead native doesn't simply perform double bass with a variety of groups in the area. He's often the bandleader who composes all of the jazz music they play. **Read more...**

Q15 If you came across this in the "Connecting the Dots" weekly e-newsletter, where would you click or tap for more information about this group?

CreativeMornings Fargo moves to Drekker's Brewhalla

CreativeMornings Fargo is moving to Brewhalla for its next gathering on Friday, Sept. 28! This means a lot more tickets will be available, but registration is still required. Mark your calendars to sign up for tickets starting at 10 a.m. Monday, Sept. 24! **Read more...**

Q6 How satisfied are you with the content of the "Connecting the Dots" e-newsletters?

- ○ Extremely satisfied
- ○ Somewhat satisfied
- ○ Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
- ○ Somewhat dissatisfied
- ○ Extremely dissatisfied

Q7 Are you able to easily find the information in the "Connecting the Dots" e-newsletter that you are seeking?

- ○ Yes
- ○ No
- ○ I do not look for specific information in the "Connecting the Dots" e-newsletter

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Q8 Why did you subscribe to the "Connecting the Dots" e-newsletters?

- ☐ To get information on upcoming arts-related events
- ☐ To get deals or special offers from The Arts Partnership
- ☐ To get news updates from The Arts Partnership
- ☐ To get interesting arts-related articles
- ☐ I did not subscribe to The Arts Partnership emails

Skip To: Q11 If Q8 = To get information on upcoming arts-related events
Skip To: Q11 If Q8 = To get deals or special offers from The Arts Partnership
Skip To: Q11 If Q8 = To get news updates from The Arts Partnership
Skip To: Q11 If Q8 = To get interesting arts-related articles
Skip To: Q10 If Q8 = I did not subscribe to The Arts Partnership emails

Q9 Why did you unsubscribe from the "Connecting the Dots" e-newsletters?

- ○ I received too many emails from The Arts Partnership
- ○ The content in the emails was no longer relevant or interesting to me
- ○ The emails looked like spam
- ○ I didn't know I was signing up for emails

Q10 If The Arts Partnership tailored content toward your preferences, would you resubscribe to the "Connecting the Dots" e-newsletters?

- ○ Yes, I would resubscribe to The Arts Partnership emails
- ○ No, I would not resubscribe to The Arts Partnership emails

Skip To: Q11 If Q10 = Yes, I would resubscribe to The Arts Partnership emails
Skip To: Q16 If Q10 = No, I would not resubscribe to The Arts Partnership emails

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Q11 Please select the content you would like to see in the "Connecting the Dots" e-newsletters (check all that apply)

- ☐ Ballet events
- ☐ Theater events
- ☐ Music Events
- ☐ Visual Arts Events/Exhibits
- ☐ Cultural Festivals
- ☐ Philanthropic/Fundraising Events
- ☐ Classes/Workshops
- ☐ Film Events
- ☐ General Arts Information

Q16 If you would like to be entered into a drawing for two free partner event tickets, please provide your email address below