

Meet the TOCG Team – Rani and Jordan in conversation

Tom: Hi everyone, this is Tom O'Connor. If you've worked with us before or read our blog, then you have certainly had plenty of chances to hear from me. So today I want you all to hear from my colleagues, Jordan and Rani. Rani Haywood is our Vice President currently based in Sydney, Australia, and Jordan Sanford is our Director of Recruitment and Professional Development based outside of Atlanta, Georgia.

They recently sat down to find out a little bit more about each other and their histories and share a little with you about the work they're currently doing with our clients. If you want to fast forward to the three and a half minute mark, you can learn which Tina Turner song is in fact a cultural phenomenon in Australia. As a lifelong Tina Turner fan, this was news to me. Anyway, we are currently at work on lots of other helpful content for you, and we hope you enjoy this opportunity to get to know our team.

Rani: Hi, I'm Rani Haywood. I'm the Vice President at Tom O'Connor Consulting Group. I head up the consulting division of the business, working with arts and cultural clients on all types of projects, mainly focused on marketing and audience development.

Jordan: Hi, I'm Jordan Sanford. I am the Director of Recruitment and Professional Development at Tom O'Connor Consulting Group. I essentially spearhead all of our recruitment and the processes behind our recruitment. I also lead our industry programs which are our Arts Marketing Roundtables, as well as the Emerging Arts Marketer Network.

Rani: So, Jordan, what was your professional journey like before you started working with us?

Jordan: That was a long and circuitous journey. I've always worked in the arts after graduating from college and in some capacity. Whether it be continuing to do performances in Baltimore, in New York City, both theatrical and alternative theater, but the bulk of my experience, it was really working for my Alma Mater and the office of undergraduate recruitment.

So, I was an admission counselor at the Maryland Institute College of Art in Baltimore, Maryland for almost a decade, about eight years. And essentially, I bounced around the country talking to young artists about their work, giving them feedback and hopefully giving them input and guidance to help them succeed in their artwork, and land top scholarship awards to MICA and other great art colleges as possible.

But right before joining Tom O'Connor Consulting Group, I was the Director of Artistic Advancement at a youth serving arts organization in the Hudson Valley called the Art Effect.

I had a great relationship with that organization when I was at admission counselor at MICA so when their previous director of their Art Institute retired, we had already had a great rapport kind of built in and I ended up working there and leading our portfolio building programs for young people ages from five to age 19.

So, somehow, I ended up being one of very few humans, at least that I know, who lived in New York City and commuted to the Hudson Valley for work. But it was a really incredible experience. And I really enjoyed my time in the Hudson Valley.

Jordan: How about you Rani? What was your past like before coming to Tom O'Connor Consulting Group?

Rani: Well, I'm from Sydney, Australia. I had been living overseas in my very early twenties and coming back to Australia was trying to think about what I wanted to do with my life. I had previously worked in marketing in publishing and decided I'd rather work in marketing something I was really passionate about. I started volunteering at a couple of theatres in Sydney. We don't really have an internship culture in Australia, so I did some voluntary work and ended up landing a job with an arts marketing consultant. So, I kind of started my career as an arts marketing consultant.

Jordan: Awesome. Oh, I almost forgot. I've been meaning to ask you because I made a discovery about Australia. I am like, kind of freaking out. So, I'm just going to say something to you and just give me your immediate reaction.

Rani: Okay.

Jordan: "Nutbush City Limits."

Rani: Are you talking about "Nutbush," as in "nut" and "bush"?

Jordan: Yes, "Nutbush," the Tina Turner song?

Rani: Yes.

Jordan: I just discovered what a big deal it is in Australia.

Rani: Is it a big deal? I mean, I know that we dance to it at weddings.

Jordan: Yeah, exactly. You know, it's like "The Electric Slide" there?

Rani: I don't know what the "Electric Slide" is. So, there you go.

Jordan: "Nutbush" by Tina Turner is not that big of a song anywhere else.

Rani: Oh really? Oh, I didn't know that.

Jordan: No! That's the thing!

Rani: So even the other day, I was at a trivia night in a pub, and they played "Nutbush City Limits" and you're not allowed to dance. That's the joke. Currently, we're allowed to do everything, but dance and sing in public.

Jordan: Oh, sure.

Rani: With COVID, so everyone did seated "Nutbush." It was ridiculous.

Jordan: And there's a dance that goes along with it?

Rani: Yeah, yeah! There's a whole dance.

Jordan: No idea, until last night. I'm going to send you the Tik-Tok that I discovered last night about this.

Rani: Yeah!

Jordan: Yeah, as soon as I found it, I was like, "I have to ask Rani about this at some point."

Rani: People do it at weddings, for sure. But it gets really boring cause it's a really long song and the dance probably has like 16 beats. So, you're just doing it over and over and over again.

Jordan: What's funny is that is one of my personal favorite Tina Turner songs like ever, but most people don't know about it.

Rani: So, you should come to Australia and go to weddings!

Jordan: Entirely. Well, I have to learn the dance first.

Rani: It's very easy.

Jordan: I'm really not good at line dances of any kind or any, I'm really good dancing with myself essentially, but coordinating with other people is a challenge.

Rani: I'd love to know the history of how that happened, to be honest.

Jordan: I would too, it's got to be an interesting story because that just doesn't happen out of nowhere.

Jordan: But anyway, we should probably get back to our conversation, you were talking about, working in Australia in your early twenties, and starting your career as an arts marketing consultant.

Rani: Yes, well, I went through quite a few different roles in Sydney. I was very lucky. I also had a stint in Edinburgh at the film festival there, and I wound up working at Sydney Theatre Company, which is the biggest theater company in Australia. I got itchy feet again and decided to come to New York to try my luck and gave myself three months to find a job.

And luckily, I got introduced to Tom O'Connor and ended up working with him at Roundabout Theatre Company, which was an incredible experience. I came back to Sydney for a while and then ended up back in New York at The Metropolitan Opera. So, I have worked in arts marketing near on 20 years now – which is terrifying – and across three continents. And I have worked at a lot of different types of performing arts companies, but primarily in theatre I would say, and it's been quite an incredible journey.

So that's how I met Tom. At Roundabout Theatre Company and we've stayed great friends since.

Rani: How did you meet Tom?

Jordan: So, it's funny. As I was leaving Baltimore, moving into New York City at the time – my partner secured a position at a school in the Bronx. I didn't have a job at the time, and I was ready to leave Baltimore. So, I decided to focus on expanding my network because I don't know about you, but it's very rare that I've found a position that I've really enjoyed by just finding something online and applying to it. It's generally come from meeting people, having a relationship prior to, that have really led me to the awesome positions that I've held.

So that being said, I did a lot of research on LinkedIn trying to find people so I could expand my network in New York City. And I came across Tom's LinkedIn profile, as well as the website, and looked into his All Rise program. I applied for that and had a couple of conversations with Tom over the phone. And he kind of took me under his wing as a mentor. And essentially, he introduced me to a number of people in the city at a number of different organizations that I was really excited about working at potentially or taking that direction with my career.

And that's when the position at the Art Effect almost fell out of the sky really. But even with me taking that position outside of the city, Tom always tried to incorporate me into the various projects that he was leading up or supporting, and we've built our relationship and rapport since then.

Rani: What you touched on is this industry seems to be all about relationships and relationship building, which can kind of be a double-edged sword because if you know people, that's great. If you don't, like in the case of you and I and moving to this city, it's a real challenge.

So, can you talk a bit about what you do in your role right now to kind of help people break down those barriers?

Jordan: Yeah, absolutely. A big part of what I do specifically with the industry programs is about facilitating connections between professionals, wherever they may be at in their career.

I think the long-term goal of the side of the business that I function in is really to create this full-service system where we're supporting arts marketers from their first or second job out of college, on through their careers, getting into leadership and as well as later in their careers, when they want to give back to the community, to young people and things along those lines.

So right now, with the Roundtables, we facilitate a space for leaders in the arts marketing space to come together and exchange notes, share ideas and best practices. Especially in this era when things kind of change on a daily basis it's super important for there to be a forum to have these conversations.

And our Emerging Arts Marketing Network for these early career folks, it's really important to build, or I should say, understand the kind of skills they need to build, in order to be successful in their career and continue moving forward. So, we have a lot of really great conversations, really interesting conversations about how to navigate the work environment, how to navigate your career and plan

for your career moving forward as well as building your network and making those kinds of connections that are going to help you succeed.

And I think again, it's really about access and who has access to these people. I think bringing these folks together in these ways gives people, especially our young folks, the opportunity to connect with leaders in the industry, as well as their peers to be able to build those kinds of connections to move forward in their career.

Jordan: In your role as VP, you're really more hands-on on the ground and working directly with arts and cultural organizations and really helping them move forward on their strategic goals. What are some of the operational challenges you see facing arts and culture organizations right now?

Rani: Well, where do I start? I mean, it's been quite a year. I mean, fundamentally, it's really at the moment a time of reckoning for organizations who are really grappling with their place in the world. Most of our clients have been off stage now for a year and some are making this pivot to virtual programming. But it really has been, I feel, like a moment for arts marketers to really cement their place in organizations because they are the department who really hold relationships with audiences. And they've become an integral part of programming decisions and decisions about how you deliver programming. And I'm hopeful that that is something that will be taken forward. And it'll be really interesting to see what happens when organizations are back onstage and where we land with that mix of virtual and in-person programming.

It's also been a year to really think about community and connection with community and what role the arts play there. So, thinking about how you deliver that and really your reason for being. And so, a lot of the work that we're doing is looking at marketing team structure at the moment. What are the roles that you need to take you forward into this new kind of future? As well as brand – really thinking about what the essence of your company and your reason is for being.

Also, there's been time to go to look at those projects that have sat on the shelf. So really looking at customer data, looking at kind of systems of how you hold data, how you look at data and what it means.

So, they're the kind of projects that we've been working on. As people were going through this period, although there's all this change happening around them, it's also a period where they've had a moment to think about those operational and behind the scenes things that you don't often get a chance to look at when you're running through a season. So, that's where we found ourselves in this period of time. And it's been really, really rewarding actually to work with clients like that.

Jordan: Is there a specific sort of challenge that stands out to you that you feel presents the greatest opportunity for organizations right now?

Rani: I think the delivery of programming virtually has opened up a whole new audience for a lot of organizations and, and really, I think now's the time to think about where are you going to take that audience. What's the path for them with your organization?

But also, when you do open your doors back again, I think the audience coming back to your venue is going to look really different. I feel like the traditional audiences for arts, there might be a little bit of fear about coming back. The older audience might be fearful of returning. And I feel like organizations are going to have to come to terms with changing their programming to suit the new audience and also think about how they make their spaces and make the experience more welcoming to more diverse audiences.

So, I think it is a moment to really see it as an opportunity, but people have to be ready to take that opportunity in their hands. It's an opportunity both with virtual and in-person programming and to be thinking about: who are our new audiences and how are we going to make them feel welcomed in our space, and how are we going to deliver programming that speaks to them?

Rani: And what about the recruitment side? Like what challenges are you seeing with your clients right now in terms of trying to recruit in this kind of crazy current reality?

Jordan: Well in a way we are kind of lucky in that there are really incredible candidates looking for work right now. So, I feel really excited about being able to help people find their next opportunity that's going to take them to the next step in their career.

I think the big challenge right now is that 2020 really opened a lot of people's eyes in terms of systematic racism, structural racism and things along those lines. I think almost every organization is looking for ways to source diverse candidates. And it's exciting in a way. But at the same time, we have to reckon with the structures that have limited the pool of diverse candidates over the years, centuries, the history of this country.

I'm really excited and hopeful because so many organizations are really adamant about wanting to ensure that they have a diverse applicant pool to draw from. But at the same time, we have to reckon with how we navigate folks who are perhaps from diverse backgrounds and have incredible skills that are well-suited for the position, but don't necessarily have the sort of exact skill alignment that one would hope. How do we prepare our organizations to support people of color in these spaces that traditionally haven't featured many folks of color in positions of leadership previously? So, I think it's a really big reckoning for the entire country as a whole, but definitely our segment of this industry. It's exciting to navigate, but it's definitely, definitely a challenge.

Rani: And just to say that's not unique to America either. As someone who's worked in Australia as well, there are definitely similar issues here that need to be reckoned with within the industry. And those questions are finally being asked. Which is great, but from your point of view, what advice would you give to people who are trying to get into the industry who don't have a background in the industry?

Jordan: Well, honestly, I think the biggest thing is relationships. It is building relationships with people and in the industry that you are trying to get your foot in the door into. Leveraging LinkedIn, reaching out to people and things along those lines, so you become a known entity. The saying tends to go, it's not what you know, it's who you know. But it's really also: who knows you and who knows what you do and what you're actually capable of. And who can really advocate for you as well.

So, I think it's really important to build those relationships with people and not being afraid to reach out, especially in this time. I think folks are really eager to connect with other people since we live in this sort of zoom existence right now, this zoom purgatory. I was without a job for a good portion of 2020, I was really surprised how many folks were eager to talk to me.

And honestly not to do a shameless plug, but I think joining our industry programs and being a part of either the Roundtable or the Emerging Arts Marketers' Network is a really great sort of fast track.

Rani: So, I'm flipping back to you to ask why have you chosen to work in this industry?

Jordan: So really, really good question. During 2020 I reflected a lot on my career. I reflected a lot on the work that I've done and almost accidentally I've built this career of supporting creative people or people who leverage creativity in interesting ways, supporting them wherever they are in their career towards whatever that next step is.

I worked in special needs education right after college for a while. And then transitioning to working at the college and supporting high school students making the transition from high school into college. And now I think I'm at the point in my career where I'm really helping professionals at the beginning of their career to continue to move forward as well as folks who are kind of at the peak of their powers continue to do well, despite what's happening in the world. So, for me, at the end of the day, it's really about building that scaffolding for creative individuals and folks who help facilitate creativity and putting that in the world.

That's really my North Star for a lot of what I do and why I've chosen this industry. And I couldn't really imagine working outside of the arts in any capacity. I went to school for it. I've worked either independently as a working artist, as well as, as an arts administrator.

At the end of the day, it's about supporting people and making sure that there's a little bit more creativity in the world every day.

Jordan: How about you, Rani? What would you, what would you say? Why have you chosen to work in this field?

Rani: I'm a consumer of art and I really get excited about the right people encountering the right art, when that kind of magic happens, when people see something or go to a show or see artwork that really kind of connects with them. I'm not an artist but to be able to make sure that artist's work is being seen and it's being seen by the right people.

I think that for me is the real key, the connection between the art and the audience is really important to me. And it doesn't matter if it's a local community theater production, or it's the Met Opera. As long as someone is kind of having a great old time during that two hour show or that five-hour opera and leaving changed that's for me really important.

I can't imagine really working in any other field, to be honest, especially in marketing. I think people have this perception about what marketing is, and I think arts marketing is very different. I mean, it's grounded in a lot of the same things, its sales led, and revenue led of course, but it also has that element of deep audience connection. And that, to me, is really important.

Jordan: It's always lovely to connect and learn more about you. And I hope this was helpful for whoever happens to listen.

Rani: Yes. Thank you all.