

REV UP YOUR MARKETING

By Bobbie Rafferty, STAGE DIRECTIONS, September 2004

Here's a quick quiz: Marketing is:

- a) purchasing as much advertising as you can afford
- b) inventing clever slogans and gimmicks
- c) unnecessary if the productions are good enough
- d) way beyond my capabilities.

The answer to all four questions? False.

You market yourself everyday, whether or not you realize it. With everything from the clothes you wear to the activities you participate in, you define how you want others to perceive you, and put yourself where you're likely to encounter people with similar interests and tastes.

Marketing your theatre company is not terribly different. At its most basic, marketing is about identifying people whose interests match what you offer, choosing the best ways to communicate with them and serving them in ways that make your theatre a desirable and accessible part of their lives.

If marketing is one of many tasks you juggle and you are unsure where to begin, don't despair. Here are "Five Ps" of marketing that you can interpret for your theatre to build and keep your audiences.

1. Positioning

Position is defining yourself for the public in relation to your competition, helping you stand out among the clutter of leisure time options. You may define your competition as broadly as you choose. Is your competition:

- other theatres in the area?
- arts groups in other disciplines?
- Amateur, professional or both?
- On a broader scale, including leisure activities such as sports, movies, outdoor activities or spending time with family?

Only you can define this, with the answers depending on your particular community.

With your competition clarified, you may choose one of two positioning strategies:

- a niche strategy, which identifies and highlights your company's unique capability or defining element.
- A differentiation strategy, by which you explain how your company differs from others.

Once patrons understand that you are the theatre that fills the eclectic, edgy niche or that you are the only source of professional live theatre in a tri-county area, they can decide if you fit their interests.

2. Product

The product of a theatre is not just a ticket purchased at the box office or the works produced. It is the entire physical and spiritual experience of attending live theatre. While you define what type or types of repertoire you perform, you also must define the larger context of the performances.

- Do you present classics in traditional stagings or in new interpretations?
- Do you specialize in new, challenging works?
- Do you present a wide range of family fare in a relaxed environment?

- Are you “minks and pearls” or “jeans and sandals”?

Your audiences need to feel that the whole theatergoing experience feeds their needs, from the plays themselves to the ambience and mood of the evening.

3. Place

From your customer’s viewpoint, place is more than your building. It is a destination and an environment. Problems, hassles and discomforts can overshadow even the best performance and may dissuade patrons from returning.

One night, attend your theatre as though you were a first-time audience member. Assess everything from the audience’s perspective. Among the many things to consider:

- Is the parking easy to find?
- Is the approach to your entrance brightly lit and safe feeling?
- Is the box office easy to find?
- Is the lobby inviting?
- Is the auditorium too hot or too cold?
- Are theater seats broken or splintered?
- Are restrooms clean and well stocked?
- Are your spaces accessible for older patrons or those with diminished mobility?

You may discover easy steps to make your theatre a place your audiences want to revisit. A map of available parking included with every ticketed order, replacing a couple of burned-out lights outside or placing chairs in the lobby for patrons to use before the house opens could go a long way toward making them feel welcome, comfortable and interested in coming back.

4. Pricing

Pricing is, of course, how much a ticket costs, but it can include discounts and packages.

- If you offer family fare, do you offer family packages that are affordable for parents who want to expose their children to live theatre?
- If you live near a military base,, do you offer a military discount?
- Are student or young professional discounts available, making you a wall-pleasing option for the under-30 crowd?

True, discounted tickets bring less revenue than full-price tickets. But if a discount brings in a patron who might otherwise not attend your theatre, you have a new patron. And a ticket sold always brings in more revenue than an empty seat. Eighty percent (or 75 percent or even 50 percent) of the full ticket price is better than nothing.

Consider, too, payment options as tools for making ticket purchases easier. Do you accept credit cards? Do you allow subscribers to pay in installments? Institute policies and procedures that make it as convenient as possible for your patrons to open their billfold and spend some income at your box office.

Remember that pricing can be an indication of quality in the buying public’s mind. Fairly or not, some people equate cheap prices with shoddy quality. While it seems perverse, and is certainly not an answer for everyone, a judicious raising of prices may improve your image to some audiences and attract them to your door.

5. Promotion

Promotion is advertising, publicity and other activities to establish awareness of your theatre in the public's mind. It is the means by which you communicate the other four Ps of your marketing mix. It is the area most people feel they understand, but it is also an area where it's easy to misspend money.

Bridal gown retailers don't typically advertise in the sports section of the newspaper, while children's clothiers often put flyers in pediatricians' offices. Similarly, your message should be where your current and potential customers will most likely see or hear it. Tracking which promotions influence your patrons' purchasing decisions allows you to allocate precious dollars for maximum impact. An audience survey can be quite informative. Other low-cost, ongoing tracking methods include:

- Coding order forms or response envelopes to discern which offers generate positive patron response
- Tracking sales volume following the launch of an advertising effort or the appearance of a newspaper article.
- Instructing box office personnel to inquire at the time of a sale where the customer heard about your show.
- Using different phone extensions for responses to different promotions.

These tracking methods, and ones you invent for yourself, can help you make informed promotional decisions, rather than relying on instinct.

Marketing is about being aware of what your theatre is, who your current and potential patrons are and how best to communicate with and serve them. Graphic design, customer service policies and a host of other marketing-related activities will flow from your answers to the Five Ps. Self-awareness, planning, and consistency are the greatest marketing tools for any theatre to pass the test of building a strong, enthusiastic audience.