

UP AGAINST THE WALL

By Stephen Peithman, STAGE DIRECTIONS, January 2003

Successful promotion means: 1) getting a message to those people who will most likely be interested in hearing it; 2) putting the message in a form that makes it easy for them to receive it; 3) presenting the message at a time in which they are most likely to pay attention to it; and 4) providing a message that will create a positive response.

Although direct mail, newspaper, radio and television publicity may be most effective overall, posters play an important role in promoting a production. That's because they can reach people in ways and places the others can't. The secret is to understand how and where, so that posters become an integral part of your total promotional package.

Consider these points as you create posters by varying the mix of the essential elements listed below.

SIZE

"Use paper larger than 8-1/2 x 11" if you want your poster to be noticed. However, size depends partly on location and cost. Many shopkeepers prefer nothing larger than 14" x 20" in their windows. On crowded bulletin boards, 11" x 17" is ideal because most other pieces will be smaller.

Presses have different maximum sheet sizes. Ask your printer what sized can be produced without wasting paper. (Standard sizes always cost the least.)

CONTENT

Cover the basics: play title, author, theatre name, date(s), address, city, time, and ticket information, in approximately that order. (Check your contract; it may specify relative type sized for the name of the author and production.)

Include a brief descriptive phrase ("a modern comedy thriller") if the play is not well-known.

Eliminate extra details in both text and graphics. A single clean image (remember the eyes from *Cats*?) can convey your play's tone and build recognition on repeat viewings.

For maximum impact, cluster lines to text; don't scatter them around the page.

COLOR

Use colors that reflect the play's mood. Blacks, blues, and purple's exude dignity. In general, bright colors imply your play is modern and lively; darker colors speak of sophistication and tradition.

Think about where you'll place your posters. Red disappears in the dark. Blue and white combination turns bland in bright lighting.

Busy, multicolored designs distract readers from the text. You can use multiple colors, but one color should dominate.

Avoid printing on fluorescent paper. It attracts attention, but it makes text difficult to read.

TYPOGRAPHY

Don't use type smaller than 18 point. Remember, people generally will be reading your poster from a distance.

Use fonts that fit the flavor of your production, but stage away from script and highly decorative fonts, unless the play is universally known. An exotic font takes a split second longer for words to register and, if the title isn't familiar, the passerby may not read it at all.

LOCATION

High-traffic areas are always best, especially where people tend to stop, such as in a shop window near a busy street corner. Other likely spots include schools, bus stops, stores, playground and restaurant windows.

Concentrate on areas that match your expected audience demographics. For most plays, coffee shops are a better bet than video arcades, for example.

Keep a list of locations where you have places posters and remove them after the play has run. It's a good way to be sure you will be welcome to post there again.

IMAGES

Audiences love to see familiar faces onstage and it doesn't have to be a Broadway star either. It might be a friend or coworker. In a community theatre setting, you can capitalize on this – and boost ticket sales in the process – by producing customized posters using head shots of individual performers and posting these in the offices or organizations where those actors work.

You'll need a high-quality digital camera, a high-quality inkjet printer, bright white photo paper and a computer layout program such as PageMaker.

Using the software program, create a template for a standard 8 ½ x 11" sheet of paper, with at least a half inch margin on all sides. The basic design is the same for each poster, with the name of the show, dates and ticket information. In the center of the poster, draw a rectangular box to frame the photographs you plan to use. (All photos will need to be the same size and shape.)

Individualize each poster by adding the name of the employee/performer. (If you use PageMaker, put the repeated information on the "master page," with the photos and individualized information on pages 1,2,3 and so on.) Mention the role the person will play, especially if it's not a lead. Then place the digital photograph inside the rectangular frame.

Print the posters on a color printer, using high-quality inkjet paper. If the organization is a large one and you need more than one or two posters to post there, you can easily make additional copies as needed.

This kind of publicity does double duty. Besides advertising your show and encouraging ticket sales, it's a morale booster for the performers. It gives them something to be proud about and shows that your theatre company cares about them as well.