

EXCERPTS

Standing Room Only: Strategies for Marketing the Performing Arts

The Customer-Centered Mind-Set

In a sophisticated marketing organization, all marketing analysis and planning begins and ends with the customer. A customer-centered mind-set requires that the organization systematically study customers' needs and wants, perceptions and attitudes, preferences and satisfactions. Then the organization must act on this information to improve its offerings to better meet its customers' needs. In this sense, marketing is a *philosophy* of management, not a *function* of the organization.

This does not mean that organizations must compromise or deny their artistic integrity and present more programs that appeal to a broader audience. It means that the organization's approach to marketing the entire experience must give the customer a central focus. A customer-centered organization always asks:

- Who is our current audience? How can we define and categorize them?
- Who is our most likely potential market for future development?
- What are their current perceptions, needs, and wants?
- How satisfied are our customers with our offerings? In what ways can we make them more satisfied? In what ways can we create and market satisfaction for other potential audiences as well?

Securing the Future: Marketing Principles and the Arts

What works well for one arts organization may not suit another organization's situation. And because environments change and people's needs, interests, and desires change over time, the best practices of today may be less appropriate tomorrow. Therefore, it is crucial that arts managers and marketers fully understand and internalize the following universal and enduring principles that underlie each and every successful strategy:

1. **Manage for the mission.** Managing for the mission means that an organization takes no decision or action that is not informed and inspired by its mission statement. The mission is the organization's purpose or reason for being. Every mission statement reflects two things: the competencies and attainment levels sought by the organization, and its purposeful commitments to various stakeholders. The organization uses the power of the mission to bring people together and to direct their energies toward a common purpose.

2. **Focus on core competencies.** Second only to its mission, an arts organization should focus on its core competencies. It is important to concentrate on only a few things, to do them well, and to communicate effectively what those strengths are.
3. **Understand the nature of the business.** Although arts organizations must focus on their core competencies, too rigid or narrow an interpretation of an arts organization's role in society can lead to its downfall.
4. **Commit resources to the marketing function.** Marketing success requires a wholehearted commitment of funds, well-trained personnel, and trust in the marketing function itself. An arts organization cannot muster or maintain a strong audience base without full-fledged campaigns that include direct mail, website and e-mail marketing, telemarketing, well-designed high-quality brochures and postcards, well-crafted and targeted letters, advertising, and special offers designed to attract and retain patrons. Market research is an investment the organization must make to develop, execute, and monitor intelligent marketing plans and thereby to sustain and increase the audience.
5. **Focus on quality.** The most important factor in the success or failure of an artistic product is its quality. The product that has a quality advantage is destined to capture and rule the minds and hearts of the marketplace. Quality is far more important than marketing tools such as price and promotion.
6. **Know the customers.** An arts organization must know its customers – its current and potential audience members. A performing arts group must start by listening to the heartbeat of its community; what people like and dislike; what they find attractive, what keeps them away; which segments of the community are most likely to be interested in its core product; which segments can be lured with augmented product features. The most successful arts organizations are those whose products and services are directed at separate, distinct, and reachable segments of the population and whose offerings are positioned from the customer's viewpoint, not the organization's.
7. **Create accessibility.** Instead of focusing on the product – “We have a great product so you should come” (the elitist, product-centered viewpoint) – the organization should focus instead on the target audience and *their* issues, concerns, needs, and preferences. Success may well lie in the details: offering a performance at a convenient time, emphasizing casual garb, or surrounding the performance with familiar faces and comfortable settings. Some organizations create more access simply by selling tickets online, at grocery stores or through peer groups and employee organizations.
8. **Understand the organization's internal biases.** Arts managers and marketers must understand the impact of their own attitudes upon the publics they are trying to reach. They should be sensitive to their own emotions, predispositions, and biases as well as those of their publics when selecting their target markets and positioning their products.

9. **View changing needs as opportunities, not threats.** As customers' needs change, so must every organization's marketing strategy. And marketers must view change as an opportunity, not as a cause for concern. *Arts organizations must be responsive to the needs of their audiences.* Each and every current and potential arts patron – including single-ticket buyers – should be respected, listened to, appreciated, and then, when possible, nurtured into higher levels of commitment.
10. **Take the long-term view.** Arts organizations commonly recognize the need to attract young audiences. But educating children is costly and targeting younger audiences is likely to imply smaller packages, lower ticket prices, and lower donation levels – in the short run. However, in the process of absorbing these costs, the organization is building a strong and broad foundation for its future and for a time when these younger people will have more leisure time and more discretionary income to pay higher ticket prices and make substantial contributions.
11. **Integrate the arts into everyday lives.** In addition to reaching out to individual audience segments, arts organizations must become active, involved members of their communities. They should engage in efforts that will weave the arts into the very fabric of community life, creating new opportunities for exposing people to art and making the artistic experience compelling to a broader number of people.
12. **Focus on the art.** Our programs should be developed not with the purpose of keeping the institution alive, but of making it viable. In the end, our accountability is to the artists and their publics – not to the organization. By educating our publics about the art we treasure and by being sensitive to the continually changing needs of various audience segments, we can build enthusiastic and loyal audiences for the future. And by doing that, we can guarantee that art will thrive and prosper.

Effective arts managers are finding that their most valuable resource is their current and potential audiences. Arts organizations must enable, expand and enhance communication with a broader range of audience segments in order to increase audience size, to broaden the audience base, to increase accessibility to various art forms, and to meet the needs of specific audience segments and contributors.”