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Assessing Marketing and Public Relations Efforts: The Customer's Point of View

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Communicating an effective message for your arts organization is an important component of success, as is the experience that a patron has when attending your events. In this issue of *Arts Insights*, we'll focus on the importance of assessing your marketing and public relations efforts from the customer's point of view. We'll talk about the "Five C's" and the "Five P's" of integrating your marketing and public relations efforts into your overall organizational strategy. And we'll provide many questions that you can ask yourself as you evaluate the effectiveness of communicating your institutional message.

THE FIVE C's

There are always basic areas that need to be addressed in assessing marketing and public relations for any organization. The messages must be reviewed carefully before they reach the public. So what types of information should you consider? They may sound simple, but they are worth reviewing here as an introduction to this article. Just ask yourself a few questions and take a look at your materials to determine if your communications are:

Correct

Is the information accurate? Correct information will help build confidence in your organization as a source of dependable information while inaccurate data will destroy the trust you've worked so hard to build. If there is any uncertainty about the message, get the correct information or don't include it.

Current

Many of the things we communicate in the marketing and public relations field are time dependent. Think about if your information is being disseminated with sufficient lead-time to allow the target audience to respond to the messages while not allowing too much time where they don't feel a sense of urgency. We've all seen bulk mailings that arrived after the actual performance or without including a call to action.

Concise

People who attend arts events are extremely busy. They value time and don't want to wade through too much information before getting to the point of your communication to them.

Coherent

Present the information in proper sequence and with the appropriate vocabulary. Be sure your audience understands the terms and acronyms used in the message, locations, and best ways to get tickets.

Complete

Convey all the relevant data necessary to allow for immediate and appropriate action. Have you ever gone to another city, picked up the arts section of the paper, and not understood the what, where, when, how and why of the event you're considering? Make sure it's clear to those who may not necessarily be familiar with your organization, its activities, or the various acronyms that you might use to describe yourself internally.

The Five C's above are obviously the overarching test of your marketing and public relations efforts. These basics must always be in place in order to stir excitement and interest in your events.

THE FIVE P's

Now that you've got the basics in mind, let's focus on the more critical issues that must constantly be assessed in strengthening your organization's marketing and public relations efforts. In this section we'll look at how the Product, Packaging, Price, Place, and Promotion can, if integrated effectively, draw audiences to your performance or exhibition event.

PRODUCT

The quality of the “product” you’re presenting to the community is of the utmost importance. Does it meet the needs of your audience? How is your arts organization different from others? Ultimately, the clarification of your product through effective strategic planning, with a clear focus on its mission, vision, and value to the community, is the best way to ensure that your marketing and public relations messages will be heard and understood.

PACKAGING

While arts marketers may not be able to change the basic product, packaging is an area that marketers exert a significant amount of experience. Not only does packaging tie to the product offerings, but it also ties directly to pricing as well. When we think about packaging, however, we also need to consider a variety of ways to get your audience to be engaged enough to make a long-term or multi-product commitment to your organization. Subscriptions and memberships are one form of packaging. Subscriptions for a full series of events produced or presented by your organization can be broken down into smaller packages whereby shorter time commitments can be made. These can be along the product lines of a certain performance genre, time of year, festival format, night of the week, time of day, social event, or other appropriate packaging that ties closely to your performance or exhibition product.

Packaging can also mean the ancillary benefits that a customer obtains by purchasing a package. Specific and priority seating, valet parking, restaurant and hotel discounts, and many other items can be added to a package to increase its perceived value at little additional cost to the arts or cultural organization. One of the most effective, of course, is allowing for special access to the artists, curators or exhibits, typically reserved for those who also make additional annual fund contributions. This both builds your brand image in the community as one that values its customers, brings them closer to your “product,” and hopefully inspires their interest in becoming more actively involved in the fundraising aspects of your organization. Overall, packaging can introduce patrons to your product at an affordable price, thus building their commitment to your organization’s long-term mission and vision.

PRICE

In this case, price goes well beyond the simple concept of how much it actually costs to buy a ticket. Price is also about developing a sense of true “value” for your performance or exhibition while maximizing the earned revenue opportunities. Of course it is most important to understand what the market will endure, as well as how your competition for those disposable income dollars has positioned itself. In addition to looking intensely at your organization’s sales history, by price category, there are various questions that need to be answered in order to thoroughly understand the effectiveness of your past and future pricing.

Here are a few questions regarding price considerations for performing arts events:

What do patrons get if they purchase a single ticket versus subscribing to a full season of events? Is parking included? How is the venue scaled? Are the most desirable seats for the audience actually priced as such? What is the price difference between price categories? Does it warrant the purchase of the highest, middle, or lowest priced ticket? How many rows under a balcony overhang can still be considered “best” based on the sightlines, acoustics, and perceived social value? Are aisle seats more desirable than inner seats? Are the seats at the rear of the balcony and orchestra sections priced low enough to drive sales for a specific performance? How limited should the seating be in this low-priced section in order to still maximize ticket revenue? Is the front of the balcony or the loge section more valuable than those seats in the orchestra level of seating? Or are special donors treated to box seats or special seating sections if they make contributions over and above the ticket price?

And here are a few points to evaluate assessing correct price for exhibitions events:

How are a visual arts, zoo or aquarium’s members rewarded compared to those who purchase general admission tickets to a single exhibition? How many special member openings are included in a membership each year? What are the different membership levels and what are the benefits associated with each? Is there a special priority entry line for members versus non-members? Is parking included in the price? Do members get special access to artists, curators, or animals for a certain price level?

These questions and others can be a good start in reviewing the most appropriate price structure for your events. Simply keep in mind the value of your product in the public’s eye and try not to devalue that product by offering too many free or special incentives.

PLACE

“Place” is more commonly known as both your distribution channel(s) (i.e., how do people buy tickets?) as well as the “place” that your product is consumed. In terms of distribution, how do patrons buy their tickets? Is it done in person, by phone or online? How easy is it to buy tickets with any of these methods? Are there enough outlets? What hours are they open? Is the telephone crew well-trained? Are they knowledgeable about your events?

Likely one of the most important distribution channels today, however, relates to your ability to sell your tickets on-line. Customers want to be able to buy tickets at any hour of the day – on their timeline and not yours. Is your ticketing system capable of “real-time” ticketing? In other words, can the customer choose his/her own seat? Do they know the seats they will get before they log out? Can the ticket be printed at home, will be mailed to them, or do they have to stand in a box office line before the event? Or do you require that your customers send an unsecured email requesting tickets and hope for the best for a future response? Technology improvements have made on-line ticketing more affordable and easier for both large and small organizations. Everyday more and more people take advantage of the ease and convenience of online transactions. Will your organization be on the cutting edge?

As mentioned earlier, “place” also refers to the venue or area in which the product (event or exhibition) is experienced. What does attending your event “feel” like? Are patrons greeted warmly by box office staff and house staff? Is there information in the lobby that will enhance the consumer’s experience with the art? Are there long lines for concessions and the bathroom? Is the venue itself appropriate to the event you are producing? Are parking, restaurants, and other amenities available for pre- and post-event activities? All of these factors contribute to the experience that patrons have with your product. Improving the experience will ultimately increase sales and audience commitment to your organization

PROMOTION

Another large topic is the area of promotion. This aspect includes everything in your marketing and public relations toolkit, including direct mail, print and electronic media advertising, the web, artist interviews, mailing list trades, database management, signage, point-of-purchase options, and telemarketing among others. How do you sort through all of these components on a limited budget while still being consistent with your message? Below are only a few thoughts on this substantial subject:

Database Management

As you can imagine, it is critical for box office and any sales personnel to consistently acquire patron name, address, phone number, and e-mail address information whenever possible. Additionally, they should be inquiring about and recording information on where those patrons heard about the performance for which they’ve just purchased tickets (i.e. direct mail, newspaper, radio, television, friend, etc.). These two activities will assist in more effectively targeting the marketing dollars, as well as continuing to grow the targeted database of loyal patrons that are so important to your future growth.

Mailing Lists and Direct Mail

An effective in-house database is only part of the marketing and public relations battle, however. There is much that can be done to supplement the mailing and e-mailing efforts of your organization. This includes free mailing list trades with other arts organization or social ventures whose patrons may have similar interests in your organization. This is typically a name-for-name one-time use mailing list exchange, clearly outlining what will be sent to a prospective ticket buyer. However, keep in mind to wisely trade lists for the best customers (i.e. season ticket holders and/or recent single ticket buyers).

Don’t ask for general mailing lists, as these are not usually very effective. Overall, this targeted strategy allows for effective dissemination of program information, builds community support and knowledge for multiple programs, and creates a synergy between arts organizations and nonprofits in the area. In addition to sending out full season brochures to a large number of potential constituents, consider periodic postcard mailings that highlight certain artists or events. Again, these all relate to your product and the audience you expect would be interested in attending your extraordinary events.

E-mail Marketing

Although direct mail has been a mainstay for years, internet marketing strategies have become an important element of a marketer's tool kit. One of the true benefits of e-mail marketing is that the process allows for a low-cost transmission of your message. Just as in direct mail marketing, the most effective e-mail communications are specifically targeted. The plethora of spam e-mails does make it more difficult to reach your potential audience. Services are now available, however, that provide stylized opt-in/opt-out e-newsletters and e-postcards that can easily be designed in-house and effectively distributed to your closest patrons. This allows for quick announcements of sales incentives, events, and communications of general interest to stakeholders.

Most e-mail marketing services include a component that track the efficacy of each communication. How many people opened your e-mail? How many people "clicked through" to order tickets? This is where the ability to order on-line becomes imperative. Cross promotional trading of space in your e-newsletter for space in another arts organization's e-newsletter offering mutual discounts to selected events can also add to your e-effectiveness in increasing sales.

Patron Service Calls

In the same way that spam has damaged the effectiveness of e-mail, telemarketing has caused patron service calls to be received with some trepidation. But always keep in mind, your customers and those who are interested in your organization need to be cultivated gently and consistently. One of the best ways to do this is to simply follow-up with single ticket or single admission purchasers shortly after they've attended your event. Inquire about their overall experience. How was the production, parking, box office, climate in the venue, or whatever you feel might be a good conversation starter. Ultimately you will build trust before asking them if they'd like to purchase a special multiple performance package or attend exhibitions of interest through ongoing membership.

Print & Electronic Media Advertising

How effective is your print or electronic media advertising? Sometimes it is extremely difficult to assess, particularly if you are not tracking sales effectively. The simplest way to determine how your patron heard about your event is to ask. Otherwise, it is always best to do your research in advance of spending your marketing dollars on media advertising. Ask the media outlet about their demographics, including age, income, geographic coverage, and any purchasing habits that they have identified. Then target those media outlets that will give you the biggest bang for your buck. That doesn't necessarily mean that they reach the masses, but that they can reach your target audience.

Additionally, you've got to build consistency of the message with uniformity of logos and brand image. One newspaper ad for an event or a few radio or television ads spread sporadically throughout a day with different typefaces, fonts, logos or colors will be confusing to consumers. Concentrate those efforts and carefully choose how and when to repeat your targeted and consistent message to your potential audience. Remember that, as a society, we are barraged with multiple media messages for a reason – it takes time for us to respond but ultimately has an impact. In overall branding terms, of course, the more events that you have and market throughout the year, the better it will be for your organization. Even if your events change, the organization's name will be consistently in the marketing and public relations messages, thereby building up brand awareness for who you are as an organization as well as for specific productions or exhibitions.

Website and E-marketing

A website combines many key elements that we've mentioned earlier, including the printed word as well as being a point-of-purchase outlet for many organizations. Again, branding the website to be consistent with other parts of your organization will be a key factor in building audience awareness. Additionally, effective use of shopping carts, pop-up ads, and e-marketing will provide both a "push" and a "pull" to and from audiences to purchase your events. Make sure the use of these tools is as easy as possible for your constituents. Spend a little extra money up front, if needed, in order to get the best website that maximizes functionality and aesthetic quality.

Press Releases

Press releases are a common tool to disseminate information to various constituencies, including the media and major institutional donors. These should be targeted towards pitching stories from any angle of community interest (i.e. local celebrity, world premieres, educational impact, etc.) that will attract media attention. Performance or exhibition reviews are beneficial, so it is important to try to get the press to as many of your events as possible. Additionally, get your artists on the air whenever possible. Patrons love to hear the artist in his or her own words.

Restaurant & Business Promotions

One way that many arts organizations are developing stronger connections to their communities while increasing attendance are through restaurant or other business promotions. Some organizations have developed simple wallet-sized cards where restaurants agree to provide a 10%-15% discount off food and non-alcoholic beverages. In exchange, the arts organization lists its restaurant partners in program books and on lobby signage. The membership-type card is also designed to include restaurant names, phone numbers and the "offer" on the back, and the organization's logo and ticket purchasing information on the front of the card. These cards are given to those patrons, who give donations at a certain level and/or are season ticket holders or members to encourage additional contributed revenue. These value-added cross-promotions add to the overall experience of the event attendee and cost the organization very little. The hope is that, eventually, staff can request that table cards be placed in restaurants to assist in further promoting events and the relationship between the community and your organization. Ultimately, this becomes a win-win situation for the restaurants, members/donors, and the your organization

CONCLUSION

Many opportunities exist to advance your organizational mission and vision in the community. Effective marketing and public relations takes many forms and can be the ultimate tool in stimulating revenue generation from a variety of earned and contributed income sources. The key is, however, to carefully assess every aspect of your efforts and view them as a first-time customer might see them, particularly any personal customer service activities not addressed above. This will allow you to gain some insight into your patrons' overall artistic experience and to their ongoing interest in supporting your organization.

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