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CENTERPIECE

FOCUS ON: MARKETING

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READ ALL ABOUT IT: NEWSPAPER PARTNERSHIPS THAT PAY OFF

BY BARBARA WATSON

When is a newspaper like a theatre?

No, this isn't the set-up for a riddle. America's daily papers and nonprofit theatres share common bonds that can help make the case for strategic partnership—relationships which can greatly extend the advertising dollars of arts organizations struggling to retain their buying power in the face of shrinking budgets. The trick: leveraging our common values, challenges, and “audience” to make the case for working together for our mutual benefit.

With the explosive growth of the Internet as the American reference of choice, newspaper advertising is arguably becoming a less effective vehicle for driving ticket sales. Patrons who once responded to a radio or television call to action—or even word of mouth from their friends and neighbors—are now increasingly likely to head to the web instead of the newsstand. Additionally, the need for a cash infusion in what has been a difficult ad sales environment has added pressure for America's dailies to raise rates—making a theatre's attempts to have a reasonable and effective presence more expensive to achieve. Yet few theatres can risk a complete retreat from their local papers.

Nonprofits also face the challenge of differentiating ourselves from our commercial cousins when negotiating newspaper advertising prices: touring productions and movies often bring generous budgets—and much needed revenue—to the table, and their ads often run side-by-side or in the same section as those of a regional theatre. Effectively negotiating a more favorable relationship may depend on educating your newspaper's management on the value of a vibrant arts community to your city's survival and helping the newspaper's staff to understand the intangibles we can deliver above and beyond our advertising dollars.

Marketing *Centerpiece* Curator: Barbara Watson, director of audience development, Center Stage. Copyright © 2004 by Theatre Communications Group, Inc. All articles reproduced by permission of the authors. No portion of this publication may be reproduced in any form, or by any means, including photocopying, without written permission from the publisher or author. Theatre Communications Group, Inc., 520 Eighth Ave., 24th Fl., New York, NY 10018-4156, telephone (212) 609-5900, fax (212) 609-5901, website: www.tcg.org. Ben Cameron, executive director; Joan Channick, deputy director; Christopher Shuff, director of management programs; and Rachel Ford, management programs publications associate.

Which brings us back to this question: When is a newspaper like a nonprofit theatre? The similarities are philosophical and practical, internal and external—and can make a powerful case for strategic partnership. Consider our common ground when making your case:

❖ **We occupy critical seats at the table of our national dialogue.**

While the particulars of our industries are quite different, both great drama and great journalism exist to illuminate and examine the important issues of our times. We suggest questions we never presume to answer—questions that can range from the cost of war to the search for meaning to the equally profound and mundane realities of living an everyday life.

Nor do we view the fruits of our work primarily as commercial goods to be bought and sold; news and art are not widgets. Issues and ideas are more than our *product*, they're the tools we bring to our society and its citizenry.

❖ **We survive or die based on the trust of our patrons.**

While the recent scandals at the *New York Times* and *USA Today* have called into question the ethical practices of some reporters, good newspapers, like good theatres, hold themselves to a greater standard of quality and accountability. Both artists and journalists acknowledge a higher calling—a recognition of the need for integrity in their work (be it journalistic or artistic)—that helps to define them both nationally and in their communities. Credibility and high standards equal respect and loyalty for both theatre audiences and newspaper readers.

❖ **We serve a curious, literate, engaged “audience.”**

Statistics from the Readership Institute at the Media Management Institute of Northwestern University (www.readership.org) show that the typical newspaper subscriber is an educated, affluent, middle-aged white man. The typical regional theatre subscriber is his female equivalent—his peer or perhaps his wife. (In both cases, the gender gap is relatively slim.) One may also assume that those who seek out information on a daily basis and those who regularly explore dramatic literature share a curiosity about the world around them.

Also of note: our single ticket buyers and newspapers' single copy readers tend to be younger and more diverse, and are not so easily converted to the concept of subscription.

❖ **We have an obligation to “perform” no matter what.**

The maxim “the show must go on” is a cliché in the theatre for a reason: we take our obligation to our audiences very seriously and we feel the pressure to deliver every day, on time, no matter the obstacles. It's that same sense of

responsibility that keeps our daily papers publishing in horrible weather, or in times of war, labor troubles or natural disaster. And it's a point of pride—and pressure—in both industries.

The challenges of the typical nonprofit theatre would also sound very familiar to most newspaper publishers.

❖ **We struggle to balance the healthy and necessary tension between our core mission and the realities of the marketplace.**

The artistic leadership of the American nonprofit theatre rightly resists the interjection of marketing considerations in programming decisions—as do the editors of our most respected daily papers. Both would love nothing more than to protect a pure vision, be it for artistry or for uncovering “all the news that's fit to print.” And our better management and marketing operations labor to support those missions without influencing—or stifling—them. Yet practical considerations often nibble away (or in some cases, swallow up) our purer, nobler ideals. Negotiating that tension in a healthy way that balances the pressures of the bottom line with service to our core values is a challenge we both share.

❖ **We find ourselves threatened by the explosion of electronic media.**

Are newspapers going the way of the dinosaur? Is live theatre? The changes in the way information (be it news or entertainment) is delivered and received are nothing less than seismic cultural shifts. Just as the Internet and the 24-hour news cycle challenge print journalists, so too television, movies and DVDs are encroaching on theatres' role in the everyday American life, bringing drama to audiences more conveniently, and with the benefit of greater resources (both in terms of production values and marketing). We struggle to impact the value equation, to explain what's unique, relevant and inherently precious about experiences and services that might otherwise appear quaint or past their time.

❖ **We serve an aging audience that isn't necessarily replacing itself.**

Some social scientists make the case that more than our vehicles and methods are changing; they theorize that growing up in a quick-cut, high-speed digital and virtual world is changing the way the human brain takes in and processes information. With our core patrons on the other side of this information divide, how do we involve and excite young and more diverse audiences without alienating our base? The lack of participation of young people both as arts patrons and as newspaper readers calls into question both industries' long-term survival.

❖ **Despite the challenges we face, we aren't about to be counted out without a fight.**

Perhaps the most important thing we have in common, however, is a sense of pride in and dedication to the unique roles we play in shaping society. We tell the stories of our times (and the stories that are timeless); we give voice to opinions of all stripes (with and without commentary); and we push and prod our communities into continuing their dialogue with themselves.

With so many shared values, goals and challenges, the case for newspaper/theatre partnerships should be compelling and resonant. But how can these similarities be leveraged to our benefit?

1. Become an investigative reporter.

Learn as much as you can about your local paper's financial health, editorial bent and community engagement programs. Doing your homework will help hone your pitch and increase your effectiveness when making your case.

An example: many newspapers make literacy programs their major giving priority. Tying your proposal to your theatre's education initiatives might get you farther than a pitch to merely upsize your ads based on the quality of your artistry. Newspapers' education programs might also be a source of a value-added opportunity when negotiating your advertising buy. The Center Theatre Group, for instance, partnered with the *Los Angeles Times*' "Reading by Nine" program to promote their production of *Little Shop of Horrors*. An educational arm of daily papers around the United States, Reading by Nine uses in-classroom materials and programs for parents and teachers to help ensure that young children become proficient readers. Tying their activities to an interesting, age-appropriate production can not only motivate children to read, it could have them convincing their parents to buy tickets for your show.

2. Pay attention to the headlines.

Tying a sponsorship proposal to a major news event may also pique a paper's interest, whether it be through a connection to a topical production or ancillary community programming.

Baltimore's Center Stage recently hosted a community forum and reading of trial transcript excerpts from the *Brown v. Board of Education* cases in recognition of the 50th anniversary of the Supreme Court decision desegregating public schools. In lieu of a traditional production sponsorship, *The Baltimore Sun* chose instead to sponsor the reading, tying their level of support not to the cost of the event itself, but to the value of being associated with an organization engaged in a topical dialogue with its community.

3. Develop multiple sources.

In addition to the feature writers and advertising salespeople, it's also critical to cultivate relationships with the staff in the publisher's office and in marketing. The more you're recognized as a player in your local community, the easier it will be to make your case for support. Also, your paper's marketing department may be in the best position to work with you on sponsorships and promotions—and the marketing staff may be the likeliest to care about the similarities in your patron demographics. You'll almost certainly get farther than with your advertising sales rep, who will come to the table with little more than his or her own revenue-oriented agenda.

Having some insight into the paper's own marketing priorities can also be key. When *The Baltimore Sun* decided to reframe its Thursday entertainment tabloid toward a younger audience, most of the city's major arts organizations were up in arms. The publication no longer spoke to their older core audiences, making it a less effective tool for motivating impulse attendees for weekend events. Many made their displeasure known by pulling their ads from the section—unaware of and indifferent to the paper's corporate mandate to provide new products for younger readers.

Center Stage chose to view the change as an opportunity to work together to attract a valuable and difficult-to-reach younger audience, and approached the paper's marketing staff with a partnership proposal. The result: in exchange for naming rights and the promise of visibility at the event, next season *The Sun* will underwrite all the costs of the theatre's new subscription series targeted toward young professionals. The paper is purchasing over \$1,000 of tickets to give away to their readers and will provide additional advertising support in the Thursday tabloid—at no charge.

4. Make a compelling pitch for your "story."

Because of the deeper pockets that movie studios and commercial theatre producers often bring to the table, a newspaper's entertainment rates can be among their highest. Use your nobler aims—and smaller budgets—to educate their publisher and advertising director about the need for lower nonprofit rates. Leverage your mutual missions and aims to help them identify with your shared goals and priorities. Help them begin to view you as another champion of their own organizational priorities.

Of course, your pitch can include a fairly forceful reminder of the revenue you bring to the table—and you shouldn't hesitate to leverage it. Better yet, do what the Mark Taper Forum and other Los Angeles-area arts organizations did: join forces and make a collective case for your cause. Meeting face-to-face with multiple advertisers all on the verge of reducing their buys—or walking away entirely—can be a great inducement to negotiate a fairer deal.

5. Embrace fair and impartial reporting.

Tempting as it may be, however, resist trying to leverage your advertising money to pressure a newspaper to increase its editorial coverage. It's the newspaper equivalent of your subscribers demanding to choose your season and could hurt your case more than help it.

A better strategy for those cities with anemic arts coverage: make the case that great newspapers are often known for their cultural reporting. (Does anyone think "book review" without thinking "*New York Times*"?) Many urban papers also take seriously the role they play in defining and shaping their cities. Consider having your board and other local business and community leaders lobby for more coverage on your behalf. Make it a matter of civic duty and competitive pride for their publisher and editorial staff to report on and review the arts.

6. Don't bury your lead.

Finally, depending on your budget size and media market, you may spend more in your local paper than on any other kind of advertising. If this is the case, say so. Knowing

that it is your top advertising priority can make an otherwise paltry budget seem more impressive to your advertising rep, and speaks to the relative importance with which you view the paper's worth.

Likewise, even modest increases in your total spending can be leveraged for an in-kind donation, value-added promotions, or an upsizing of your ads at no charge. Ask to have your new dollars matched (at minimum). And don't forget to do your part to return the favor: have your radio or other advertising reference a coupon or discount code published in your newspaper ad. Actively driving readers to the paper can only help your negotiating position.

With what may be bitter memories of unfavorable past reviews coupled with growing concerns about watching either your ads or purchasing power shrink, reframing your theatre's attitude about your local newspaper may not be easy. But perhaps, by remembering the missions, challenges and values we share—and by using them to help reframe your relationship—we two dinosaurs-in-the-making may be able to help each other prove the rumors of our extinction more than a little premature.

CENTERPIECE TOPIC CURATORS

TCG wishes to thank the following *Centerpiece* topic curators:

- ❖ *Marketing*: **Barbara Watson**, director of audience development, Center Stage, bwatson@centerstage.org
- ❖ *Development*: **Dawn Rains**, director of development, Seattle Repertory Theatre, dawnr@seattlerep.org
- ❖ *Education*: **Daniel Renner**, director of education, Denver Center Theatre Company, renner@dcpa.org
- ❖ *Governance*: **Judy Hansen**, trustee, Milwaukee Repertory Theater, hansenjudy1@aol.com