



# TCG

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## CENTERPIECE FOCUS ON: DEVELOPMENT & MARKETING

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### LEARNING TO PLAY A "BEST SUPPORTING" ROLE

BY LINDA GEESON

Lately I've been thinking a lot more carefully about how I answer the inevitable question from new acquaintances: "So what do you DO?" For a long time I'd shoot back with a glib, "I'm a PR flack for a professional theatre; advertising, publicity, promotions, yadda yadda yadda." But in January, Center Stage adopted a team-based management approach that has invited — and forced — each senior manager here to think more globally about the best interests of the organization, and suddenly my responsibilities aren't quite so easy to explain. Although rewarding, it's a bit unsettling. Show of hands: how many of us have never experienced a conflict between Development and Marketing? There's always something trying to come between us: who has priority for Opening Night tickets, major donors or press people? Do we schedule the gala based on when the committee thinks it will sell, or when it won't cost us a sold-out Saturday night in the middle of a can't-miss show? Should we use marketing benefits to attract philanthropic sponsors? Sure, we all have the theatre's best interests at heart, as long as we can do it our own way.

So, the two articles Lisa Salomon and I have selected for this issue of the TCG *Centerpiece* focus on two excellent reasons we have to squelch the squabbling and work together. In "Sex, Drugs...and Opera," Eileen Daspin explores the way our colleagues in the opera world have tried to bring their art to an audience we all covet, young adults. Theatre, in my opinion, has a better chance of capturing and keeping these lively young minds (and one day soon I'll tell you how Center Stage has grown the under-30 crowd from eight percent to 24 percent of our total audience), but this 1997 *The Wall Street Journal* piece reminds us all of what a challenge it is to win hearts and minds, and why it therefore requires teamwork.

The second article, by Edith Falk of Campbell & Company, points out the great opportunity we have to increase both earned and contributed income in our organizations, if only we pull together to treat individuals like, well, individuals — not subscribers, donors, prospects, or however we pigeonhole them, but as people who may develop grand relationships with us and our theatres, if we are flexible, smart and start supporting each other's efforts to view people as whole. Are YOU ready to strive for "best supporting" honors?

What is missing from this issue is more input from YOU. What are your favorite resources? Best practices? Funniest stories? Most creative ideas? What's the issue that most has you stumped? The internet has taken away so many excuses for not sharing ideas; e-mail is frighteningly fast. When something occurs to you, send it off in rough form right then and there. We'll take care of collecting, editing and polishing the info, and getting it back to the field. I promise this won't hurt a bit.

Hope you enjoy the articles, and that we hear from you soon!

Development & Marketing *Centerpiece* curators: Linda Geeson, Director of Communications, Center Stage, and Lisa Salomon, Director of Development, Berkeley Repertory Theatre.

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## SEX, DRUGS, AND... OPERA

BY EILEEN DASPIN

The fabulous factor was in overdrive at the New York Opera's *Cunning Little Vixen* benefit last fall. Wedged into a local thrift shop owned by the opera, 150 fashionistas celebrated and ferreted out second-hand bargains. Krug and party favors flowed as freely as air-kisses. Old-line socialites mingled with up-and-comers. A male editor of *Vogue* magazine swanned about in a lace bustier and bustle, while a Donna Karan model navigated a cascade of pink feathers that dropped from the ceiling.

The evening's marketing message was clear: Opera is hip. But John Goodfriend, manager of a SoHo furniture store, wasn't buying it. Partying with models? Fine. But going to the opera? No thanks.

"Even if I wanted to go," says Mr. Goodfriend, 34-years-old, "I couldn't necessarily find someone to go with."

Talk about sour notes. Despite years of modest efforts to woo younger patrons with discounts and flashy benefits, most audiences are getting stubbornly older. So now some companies are resorting to truly outlandish measures. Lowering the bar on high culture, they are trying everything from Hollywood-style marketing campaigns to MTV aesthetics. Opera companies are handing out scratch-and-sniff cards to let the audience members smell what is onstage. Symphonies are going multimedia, dramatizing the classics with staged riots, scenes of drug-addled composers and love stories. The New York City Ballet is promoting its own workout at fashionable gyms and even has its dancers appear in a teenybopper video featuring pint-size twins Mary-Kate and Ashley Olsen.

Such programs have left the arts world bitterly divided. Companies say they are simply doing what they must to fill seats. But purists see the heavy hand of heathenism. "It's pandering," says Phylis Kalla, a 68-year-old Pittsburgh woman who thinks music has gone so far downscale that she has let all of her concert and opera subscriptions lapse. So far, the new approaches are yielding mixed results. On the one hand, a study released in November showed a jump in interest in performances. About 51 million people ventured out to at least one opera, symphony or ballet performance in 1997, up from 38 million in 1992, according to the study, which was commissioned by the National Endowment for the Arts. Splashy magazine spreads have also bumped up the performing arts profile, showing the nose-and-navel-ring crowd in line for opera tickets and celebrating photogenic performers like mezzo-soprano Cecilia Bartoli and violinist Anne Sophie Mutter. Opera in particular has broadened its appeal, boosted by super-titles that translate the libretto into English. Some like tenor Luciano Pavarotti have become as recognizable as pop divas and even perform with them.

But beneath the breathless publicity, the new demographic is basically the same as the old one. Of the three major performing arts, only opera is reaching a younger audience, and its profile has barely budged from a median age of 45 in 1992 to a median age of 44 in 1997. During that same period, ballet audiences actually grayed three years — from 40 to 43. Symphony audiences also aged — to a median of 46-years-old from 45-years-old in 1992.

The problem is that many of the new audience members are going only two or three times a year rather than subscribing. "There's been support on a superficial level, but you're not getting the same proportion of people who are deeply committed," says Nicolas Zill, vice president at the research firm of Westat Inc., Rockville, MD, which conducted the NEA survey.

A current Oregon Symphony series shows how hard it is to convert novices into aficionados. In 1995, the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation approached the symphony with a proposal. As part of its "Magic of Music" initiative, the Foundation would give the Oregon company \$50,000 to design a concert capable of luring the 20- to 40-year-old crowd.

The result: "Who killed Mozart?" — an evening that included a Mozart "corpse" laid out in the lobby, and actors in period dress yelling, "Who killed him?" Between Mozart pieces, the actors did dramatic recreations of scenes from the composer's life. Miami-based Knight liked the pilot so much that it later offered another \$750,000, which the Oregon Symphony used to develop a series that mixes musical excerpts with video footage and dramatic performances. Known as "Nerve Endings," the series has gone

on to include “Love, Lust, and Lunacy,” a concert-cum-drama featuring lovelorn Hector Berlioz penning “Symphonie fantastique” while high on opium.

But results have been mixed. While subscriptions nearly doubled in the second year, few of the newcomers seem to be interested in the Symphony’s regular fare. Originally, the symphony hoped to transform young people into classical-music fans. Now it simply hopes that “they’ll become “Nerve Endings” subscribers,” says Carrie Kikel, the orchestra’s director of public relations.

Tara Choate, a 24-year-old book editor, went to her first “Nerve Endings” concert, “Stalin vs. Shostakovich,” because she thought the radio ad was “catchy.” Though she listens to mainly alternative rock and country music, Ms. Choate was impressed by the program, especially the heated onstage debate between actors playing the composer and the Soviet leader. “It was better than the best movie I’ve seen,” she says, but Ms. Choate notes she’d be “less gung ho” about subscribing to a series that didn’t follow the “Nerve Endings” format.

In fact, the Symphony’s Ms. Kikel says that even “Nerve Endings” isn’t pulling in enough money to be self-sustaining. Most of the concerts are only about 75% full, and that included 400 or 500 free tickets that the orchestra gives out as promotions. To finetune its strategy, the Symphony is continuing to hold focus groups — at \$2,200 a pop.

All of this would have been unthinkable a generation ago. But today, even the stodgiest arts organizations are concluding that they must change their ways. With government funding for the arts dwindling, dozens of companies have already gone out of business, and many others are struggling to stay afloat. (Ticket sales can account for as little as 40% of a show’s cost; the rest has to be made up in fundraising and grants.)

“For 200 years, what you played had to do with what the artistic organization wanted to perform. It had nothing to do with the audience,” says Gideon Toeplitz, managing director of the Pittsburgh Symphony. “Then one day the conductor looked up and said, ‘Where are all the people?’”

Mr. Toeplitz is trying a truly radical approach: a series based entirely on market research. With a \$70,000 grant from the Pittsburgh Foundation, the Symphony hired a marketing firm to canvas 1,500 higher-income households about what they wanted. The answer: three concerts a year, with a relatively cheap average ticket price (\$31.57), a party after the concert and as much visual stimulation as possible. Thus was born “Soundbytes,” a Saturday-night series, produced by the head of the drama department at local Carnegie-Mellon University, on a \$160,000 budget.

The first production, in November, spliced bits of Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring* with staged riots, recreating the turmoil that disrupted original performances of the piece in 1913. The evening was narrated by David Ogden Stiers (Major Winchester from the TV sitcom *M\*A\*S\*H*). Whether the first trio of concerts will pay for themselves remains to be seen — two are scheduled for later this year — but Mr. Toeplitz is confident they “will in the long run.” He’s so enthusiastic about programming for market segments that he has applied for another grant to survey young people and students.

“There are some orchestras that will say, “Programming to target markets? Never!” Mr. Toeplitz says. But he is more concerned about shrinking audiences than tradition. “With all due respect to our critics,” he says, “if we could get those people to come to regular concerts we would.”

Some see such market-driven programming as the dumbing-down of classical music. Ms. Kalla, the Pittsburgh music buff, labels the concept of mixing musical snippets and theatre “terrible,” grouching that “if you don’t have time to listen to the whole thing, don’t bother.” She says it is higher quality performances and not docuconcerts or multimedia presentations that will draw younger audiences.

“Raves,” she says, “That’s what sells performances.”

To appease such traditionalists, the New York Philharmonic is planning a series aimed at enticing senior citizens back into the fold; the “Seniors Institute” will feature traditional concerts pegged to educational events. People want to enjoy classical music without “bells and whistles” and without having to watch actors “jumping up on chairs staging a riot,” insists Deborah Borda, the Philharmonic’s executive director.

Indeed, a soon-to-be-released survey by Westat, the research firm, suggests that trying to satisfy young people may be largely hopeless, no matter how funky the performance antics. The study shows that most 18- to 25-year-olds fail the crucial tests of

classical music appreciation: They don't listen to it regularly at home — either on CDs (many do not own anything classical at all) or on the radio. Those with some interest typically buy only single tickets. They don't go regularly as their parents do.

Those results jibe with the experience of the Portland Opera, which last year tried to bait new fans with a scratch-and-sniff opera. As spectators arrived for Prokofiev's *The Love for Three Oranges*, they were given scratch-and-sniff cards to compliment the action on stage. When one character got offended, for example, he bent over and discharged a plume of smoke from under his coattails, the companion smell: flatulence. The idea was to create "an event to cause a buzz on the street," says the opera's marketing director, Jim Fullan.

But just 80% of the tickets were sold, compared with 88.5% for the better known *Tosca*, which was also performed last season. Similarly, the New York City Ballet, despite its foray into gyms and its Mary-Kate and Ashley Olsen video, has seen ticket sales slide to 349,000 last year from 380,642 in 1994.

Even if the newfangled approaches aren't instant hits, their sponsors hope for bigger audiences in the future. "Our feeling is if we can get you in the first time, you'll enjoy it so much there's a 75% chance you'll come back," says Mr. Fullan.

The San Francisco Opera has already scored with young audiences for opera, with lower prices, single ticket sales and savvy advertising. A 1996 production of *La Boheme* used Toulouse-Lautrec-like posters, declaring it "a tale about young hedonistic bohemians; should be perfect for San Francisco." It and a youth-centered performance of *Madame Butterfly* a year later drew audiences whose average age was 35.

While executive director Lotfi Mansouri admits he "got some nasty letters from subscribers who thought the brochures were pornographic," he points out that the average age for all the company's performances has dropped six years since 1996. Today the average age is 49 years old.

But many young people say they are unlikely ever to patronize the classics as much as their elders do. Jodi LaBow, a 30 year-old fashion industry headhunter in New York, says she goes to classical concerts only if her parents or in-laws buy the tickets. Although her father is a musician and her uncle is an opera singer, she just isn't interested. "It's expensive. I'm lazy. I'd rather sit home on my couch," says Ms. LaBow, who nonetheless traveled to Philadelphia recently for a Dave Matthews concert. "It goes along with 'Why don't I go to the gym?'"

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## BUILDING INDIVIDUAL SUPPORT: A SHARED RESPONSIBILITY

BY EDITH H. FALK

The numbers are out. *Giving USA* reports that philanthropic giving in 1998 totaled more than \$174.52 billion. Of that amount, individuals, either through outright gifts and pledges or through bequests, gave 85.1 percent. By contrast, *Theatre Facts 1998*, based on TCG's annual Fiscal Survey, reported that individual gifts accounted for only 28 percent of total contributed income for theatres included in the survey.

While I don't think we will ever see the giving allocations for theatres mirror those for giving nationally—theatres will always enjoy considerable support from foundations for arts-in-education, artistic development and other special initiatives, and from corporations for similar activities and sponsorships—these numbers suggest that theatres still have a long way to go in developing individual support. What can we do to increase our share of the individual philanthropic market?

For a long time, many theatres, and performing arts organizations in general, have focused most of their resources and energies on cultivating corporate and foundation support. These constituencies are readily identifiable; their giving priorities are usually clearly stated; their grants tend to be large—at least four figures, often five or more—and staff can approach these sources on their own, without involving too many Board members. While foundations and corporations will continue to be important sources of philanthropic support for theatres, their giving priorities tend to change over time. Increasingly they prefer to support special

projects, especially those that target underserved populations—and there’s only so much arts-in-education money any theatre can absorb — and, as the statistics quoted above confirm, they represent only a small percentage of the giving capacity in any community.

Individuals, on the other hand, are much more likely to make unrestricted gifts. When they support special projects, they are more open to a broader range of projects, and once they start giving, they are more likely to give over a longer period, and to increase their giving over time. So, how do we get their attention?

### Who Are These Individuals Anyway?

First, we need to stop putting “our” labels on them. We call them single-ticket buyers, subscribers, small donors, larger gift donors and so forth. We sometimes even assign them different characteristics and motivations depending on which category we have placed them in at the time. We tend to call or write them to renew their season tickets at one point in the year, and call or write them to make a gift at another time in the year. We use lively, multi-color brochures to entice them to renew their subscriptions, and dull, typewritten letters to invite their support. We often fail to recognize that it is these very people whose level of participation in — and support of — our theatres can and will grow as they become better informed and feel more engaged in our total enterprise.

So, why aren’t we doing a better job of engaging them? We tend to send different, sometimes inconsistent messages to our individual patrons, in part because the activities directed to them — marketing and development — are often handled by separate departments. Each is focused on meeting its own bottom-line goals. As a result, too little attention gets paid to the ways in which these departments can — and need to — work together to move their individual patrons along the continuum of increased involvement with the theatre.

Fortunately you don’t have to change your structure — although a number of performing arts organizations have recently combined development and marketing into a single external relations department — but you may need to change the way you think about — and interact with — the individuals who are such an important part of your theatre’s family.

### Building “Ownership” in Your Theatre

Most of the research conducted on individual giving cites the primary reason most people don’t give to a particular organization is that they weren’t asked. But how can that be, you ask? Most of you probably feel that you are asking them for money all the time. But, it’s possible that your request is so low-key or so impersonal that they miss it: a direct mail letter tossed unopened; a single line on the subscription renewal form that goes unnoticed; an appeal buried in the program that is overlooked.

Further, research has shown that theatregoers are often confused about — or oblivious to — the differences between nonprofit and commercial theatres, or do not fully appreciate the larger mission of nonprofit theatre. These theatregoers are not likely to “get it” on their own; it’s our job to educate them, over time, about our theatre’s larger commitment to showcasing new works and the classics, to nurturing artistic talent, to developing new audiences, to contributing to the artistic and economic vitality of our communities.

We know that individuals who feel engaged in the life of an organization tend to give more and tend to increase their giving to that organization over time. Development staff are probably already paying close attention to engaging your board members and best donors in the life of the theatre. But what are you doing to build the knowledge and involvement of others? Most of you will never have the staff or budget to reach everyone on a person-to-person basis. But there are many things you can do, especially when marketing and development work together, to give your patrons the sense that they are important to you, and that you value their participation.

Whether marketing and development are part of the same department or separate departments, make a point of meeting before the start of the season — and regularly throughout the year — to discuss how you can work together to help increase your patrons’ sense of “being part of the family,” build their understanding of the larger enterprise beyond the production they see on the stage, bring them to the theatre and theatre events more often — in short, make them feel that they are an integral part of the work that you do. And, as you do this, remember that an educated subscriber is more likely to make a gift, and an engaged donor is more likely to renew. In this way, everybody wins.

### Sidebar

Here are some questions and suggestions you might want to consider as you think about how individual patrons experience the theatre from their perspective, and what you might do to enhance that experience and, thus, increase their level of participation:

- ❖ When a subscriber calls the box office for a ticket exchange, does the box office attendant refer to her using her name? If your theatre waives ticket-exchange fees for donors, does the box office attendant make a point of thanking the donor for her support as he lets her know that fee is waived?
- ❖ Most theatres list the names of donors who give over a certain amount. Why not also honor subscribers who have subscribed for a milestone number of years by listing their names in the first program or newsletter of the year?
- ❖ Does your subscription-renewal brochure talk about the many other activities that your theatre is engaged in with the same bold headlines and dynamic copy as the announcement of the season's productions? Does the renewal form make it easy to include a contribution? Is your telemarketing staff trained to ask for a contribution?
- ❖ Are development-related stories relegated to a single page or section (usually toward the back) of your newsletter? Does the way you talk about fundraising and donors in your newsletter and printed program create an impression that this is an "afterthought"?
- ❖ Are you using printed materials, e.g., newsletters, programs, and lobby displays, to take your audience "behind the scenes" to help them understand what goes into putting a production on the stage? (For the first time that I can recall, one of the theatre newsletters that I receive included a fascinating story on the role of the dramaturg.)
- ❖ What are you doing to help your audience understand how you are funded, to help educate them that the ticket price covers only a part of the costs? When was the last time you produced an annual report, or, at least included an annual reporting to your audience in your newsletter or program?
- ❖ Do you ask for a gift more than once a year? If the first request is for general unrestricted support, why not ask for a second (or third) gift for a special project or activity? Then, support that special-project request in your newsletter, program and other publicity. Do you have enough flexibility in your calling schedule to ask for a special gift around a special event, such as a major feature story in the local media about your arts-in-education program, or a surge of interest nationally in your theatre around a particular production? Do the marketing and development offices have a contingency plan should such an opportunity present itself during the year?
- ❖ Do you look for ways to involve non-board members on various committees? Not only is this useful in bringing new energy and perspective to the theatre's activities, it also is an excellent way to engage a larger group of people.

These are just a few questions, ideas and suggestions. Others among you undoubtedly have others that hopefully you will share with your colleagues in future issues of the *Centerpiece*.

*Edith H. Falk, CFRE, is Co-president of Campbell & Company, a national consulting firm that provides development and marketing counsel to a wide range of nonprofit organizations nationwide, including a number of TCG members.*