

Strategic Planning in the Arts: A Practical Guide

Building Visibility

Marketing the Arts

In order to be successful, arts organizations must be visible. The most appropriate method for building visibility is to produce superior artist programming on a sustained basis. But this good art needs to be well marketed.

Environmental analysis reveals that many of the pressures facing arts organizations today result from relatively high rates of growth in expense budgets during the 1990's. This growth in expenses has not been met by an equal growth in earned income as arts purchasers (ticket buyers and presenters) were unable to increase expenditures. As a result, competition for *unearned income* (contributions) has increased considerably at a time when corporate and government grants are more difficult to obtain. This competition is not limited to companies in the same arts category or even to arts organizations in general, but between all not-for-profit organizations. The arts organizations that compete successfully for funding are those that produce great work and build the visibility for that work that is necessary to attract both earned and unearned income. All arts organizations must explicitly address the need to build visibility in their strategic plans.

The most appropriate method for building visibility is to produce superior artistic programming on a sustained basis. Arts organizations that consistently create exciting programming and that add interesting complementary events to their basic programs (e.g., symposia, lectures, master classes), are likely to develop strong institutional identities.

Yet in the current environment, high quality programming is not necessarily sufficient. Successful arts organizations will be those that create a marketing mechanism that promotes this programming.

This is dangerous territory. While the importance of building visibility is indisputable, priorities must be clear. The aim of any arts organization is to achieve its artistic and educational goals - not to be a profitable business. Building visibility should not require artistic directors to change their visions. Too many arts organizations (usually after substantial Board pressure has been brought to bear) are now planning their repertoires simply to meet popular tastes. The best arts administrators will be guilty only of providing the maximum amount of media coverage for the work the artists wish to produce anyway. While artists must be free to create, administrators must work to build visibility for those creations.

What does visibility do? It creates an awareness of the organization and its programs, and endorses the organization's accomplishments and quality. This instills the desire to become involved by buying tickets, presenting the company on tour, contributing funds, enrolling in a school, volunteering time or joining the Board. Yet apart from business-as-usual ticket-selling techniques, too little time is typically spent by most arts executives planning a "visibility campaign." Every arts organization should plan to be visible to the community at least once a

quarter (and once a month for very large organizations) through feature stories, major announcements and special events.

The most obvious result of building visibility is to increase earned income, primarily through ticket sales. But building visibility does more than sell tickets or attract tour dates. It also helps to attract donors and Board members.

Quite simply, strengthening one's Board is the single most productive way to expand one's development effort. Attracting those individuals with a commitment to the art form and the company, and with the means to give or raise funds is essential to building one's donor base in a meaningful way. How does one attract these strong Board members? Through a communications program aimed at building credibility and excitement. Successful people want to attach themselves to successful organizations. They also want to join Boards composed of individuals they want to know and with whom they want to be associated.

This approach works with one's donor base as well. Many donors want to associate themselves with successful organizations. While special appeals to stave off a financial crisis can be short-term stop-gap measures, no organization succeeds by constantly threatening bankruptcy. Donors get tired of bad news. Creating a good news scenario, while remaining realistic about one's problems, is the best approach to building a fertile fund-raising environment.

Arts organizations have only scratched the surface of potential earned and contributed revenue. There are many people who would enjoy the arts if they knew about them and many donors who would be interested in funding arts activities if they heard about them.

Building this visibility with patrons, presenters, ticket buyers, government agencies, foundations and corporations requires a comprehensive visibility plan.

The most easily controlled, but most expensive, way to build visibility is with company-sponsored advertising and other standard marketing tools. But simply building an expensive advertising or direct mail program is not enough. There is even greater power in public relations. When an outside party writes about an organization, they are endorsing it. Even a bad review shows that the organization is being treated seriously. Arts organizations must work diligently to get coverage. And this coverage should be from both local and national sources. Appearances on local television interview shows can be helpful. Corporate donors, in particular, are concerned about the exposure of the organizations they support. Get the local newspaper to do a story. Many radio stations are looking for people to interview. But be aware that no one article, interview or television appearance is enough to build visibility on its own. The impact of a single story is small; the effort to build a media profile must be consistent and aggressive.

There are other approaches that are more controllable than public relations and less expensive than advertising but can lead to a great deal of visibility, and do not require establishing the longest tap dance line in America!

Several arts organizations have mounted museum exhibitions that describe their histories and repertoires. These exhibitions of costumes, set designs, photographs, posters and videos help create visibility while also serving as important educational vehicles. They can be of particular

help to those organizations that have short home seasons and whose donors and prospective donors have little opportunity to see the company in action.

These exhibitions, frequently co-ventures with major museums or libraries, demonstrate another way arts organizations can build visibility - by associating themselves with other organizations having attractive constituencies. Both organizations can benefit from this collaboration. Find local colleges, other arts organizations or other community groups who can collaborate with you. Outreach programming provides a perfect opportunity for such ventures; projects one organization cannot afford alone can be jointly funded, frequently pleasing major donors interested in new funding methods.

Sometimes just linking to an important individual can help build visibility. Many celebrities are happy to participate in annual fund-raising events. Their presence is newsworthy and builds credibility for the organization. (It also helps sell tickets at prices substantially higher than normally charged by the organization.)

Of course, with limited people and money, arts organizations can't do everything and it is essential to focus the search for visibility. Doing a little of everything invariably ends up producing very little of anything. It is essential to determine where a visibility campaign should focus - on donors? on ticket buyers? One way to answer this question is to examine the earned income-to-unearned income ratio. If a very high proportion of the organization's income is gained through ticket sales and tour fees, greater attention to building visibility with donors should pay off; conversely if earned income is low, building awareness among potential audience members could be helpful.

Creating visibility is achievable by all sizes and types of companies. Many executives of smaller arts organizations are skeptical about finding the funds required to build visibility and about the applicability of marketing techniques used by large institutions. But the power of visibility can be observed in the results of arts organizations of all sizes.

If arts executives work hard to convince donors and ticket buyers that their organizations are real, potent, creative entities, that they serve the community in many ways, that they are fun to work with, and that there is value to being associated with them, these organizations will be able not just to survive but to thrive. As these executives work to increase visibility the entire arts community benefits since all publicity for any arts organization helps every arts organization. Creating this heightened public appreciation for the arts will require a great deal of planning, it will require a great deal of discipline, and it will require a great deal of mutual respect between the artistic and administrative staffs of every arts organization.

MARKETING PLANNING ISSUES

Each of the following issues should be addressed in the marketing plan:

- Does the organization currently mount a visibility campaign?
- At whom should a visibility campaign be aimed? ticket buyers? donors?

- What are the current demographics of the organization's audience?
- How can the audience be expanded?
- What message does the organization wish to convey to its audience?
- What are the best methods for conveying the message?
- What is "newsworthy" about the organization?