

# Collaborating for Audience Development

How working together can bring more patrons to your theatre



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**M**ARKETING THEATRE TICKETS, IN CONTRAST to the marketing of most consumer products, is not a zero-sum game. With many—perhaps most—consumer products, you can only gain a customer at the expense of your competitors. If a customer is in the market for a car, for instance, he's probably only going to buy one of them. So if he decides to buy a Honda, he's not going to buy a Toyota.

Similarly, a person can use only so much toothpaste, so if a person is buying Crest, she isn't going to be buying Colgate.

Fortunately that's not the case with theatre tickets. There is certainly an upper limit to the number of times a person will attend the theatre in any given period of time, but it is definitely *not* the case that attending Theatre A this week will preclude attending Theatre B next week. In fact, it's likely that a person

who attends and enjoys a show at Theatre A will be *more*, not less, receptive to the idea of attending other theatres in the future.

Collaborations with other theatre companies in your area can provide significant marketing opportunities, introducing new patrons to your theatre and expanding the total market for theatregoing in your area. Particularly for mid-sized and smaller theatre companies in a crowded market, there is indeed strength in numbers.

## THE BASICS

Marketing collaborations can take many forms, some very simple. Mailing list exchanges, for instance, are an excellent way to bring your theatre to the attention of patrons who are interested in theatre but might not be aware of your company's offerings. Likewise, exchanging ads in each other's program books can bring upcoming shows to the attention of theatre patrons at a time when they are particularly receptive to such messages. If your theatre isn't already doing these kinds of trades with your colleagues on a regular basis, you should be.

Many areas have theatre guidebooks or calendars, which list all the theatres in an area or all the theatre offerings available in a particular time period. These joint efforts are sometimes spearheaded by local convention bureaus, arts service organizations, and newspapers and other media outlets. They can be useful for both tourists and residents. Again, if your area doesn't have these mechanisms in place, you should look into starting them.

## EXPLORE BOSTON THEATRE

Recently a group of mid-sized theatres in the Boston area decided to take the concept of marketing collaboration one step further. Seven theatre companies—Actors' Shakespeare Project, Boston Theatre Works, Lyric Stage Company, New Repertory Theatre, SpeakEasy Stage Company, Stoneham Theatre, and Wheelock Family Theatre—banded together to create "Explore Boston Theatre," a promotional campaign aimed at introducing new people to their theatres. The group received seed funding from the Adams Arts Fund, a statewide granting program that funds cultural economic development projects.

The campaign involved a joint brochure that listed all the companies' 2006-07 season shows and offered Buy-One-Get-One tickets at all seven theatres. The brochure was distributed via copies of the Sunday *New York Times*, which audience research had revealed as a popular media choice with the audiences at these theatres, and the campaign was supported with both print and online advertising.

Jeff Poulos, executive director of StageSource, the service organization that served as lead partner on the project, commented, "We know from research that audiences appreciate the quality and intimacy of the theatre experience these mid-sized companies offer, and we are looking to create a brand identity for these companies as a group."

At press time the campaign had just gotten underway, and ticket sales results won't be known for a few more months. But, Poulos notes, "We have anecdotal evidence already that the campaign has improved the visibility of the seven companies, sold some tickets and subscriptions, and set the stage for even more joint marketing efforts in the future." The seven are looking into seeking funding to offer joint subscriptions next year.

## SAMPLER PACKAGES IN NEW JERSEY AND ATLANTA

A group that has taken that next step is the New Jersey Theatre Alliance, a consortium of 22 professional theatres located around the state. The Alliance has been offering "Sampler" subscriptions to its member organizations for more than a decade. For \$70, the customer receives a ticket to three theatres of his choice—and if his selection includes one of the smaller grassroots theatres, he can receive a fourth ticket for free.

The purchaser of a Sampler receives vouchers to the three theatres of her choice, which she then redeems directly with the theatre box office. A staffer at the Alliance handles the money and voucher mailing, for which the Alliance collects a small service charge on each order. The Sampler is promoted through the Alliance's own website and mailings, plus occasional ads in local media.

According to John McEwen, executive director of the Alliance, "We wanted to let people know that there is quality theatre in New



Jersey. We're sandwiched between New York and Philadelphia, and sometimes people aren't aware of what's available closer to home." He continued, "We wanted to give people an opportunity to experience all of our theatres, not just the larger theatres or those in their immediate community." McEwen estimates that the Alliance sells about 500 samplers a year.

The Atlanta area has a similar program, the "Take 5 Sample Pass," in which for \$50 patrons receive a punch card good for a ticket at any five of ten participating mid-sized theatre companies. The program is run on a shoestring: the companies each put in a small amount of money to create a simple flyer, program book ad, and one-page website. Each company has helped to publicize the program at their own shows and in newsletters, and they have worked with corporate listservs, local realtors, flyer distribution "street teams" and other free or inexpensive vehicles to get the information distributed more broadly.

Jessyea Holland of the Atlanta Coalition of Performing Arts, which handles fulfillment of the Sample Passes, comments, "Customer feedback has been very positive. Many customers had been aware of only three or four of the 10 theatres. 'Take 5' encourages them to venture outside their own geographic area—and also to patronize restaurants and other businesses, to invest back in the city."

**THE HARTFORD ARTS 6-PACK**

Another interesting twist on the sampler idea has taken place in Hartford, where a consortium of arts organizations—not just theatres—has been offering a "6-Pack" subscription to organizations in all the arts, all around the city. For \$102, a patron receives vouchers for seven tickets to six arts organizations including the Bushnell, Hartford Stage,

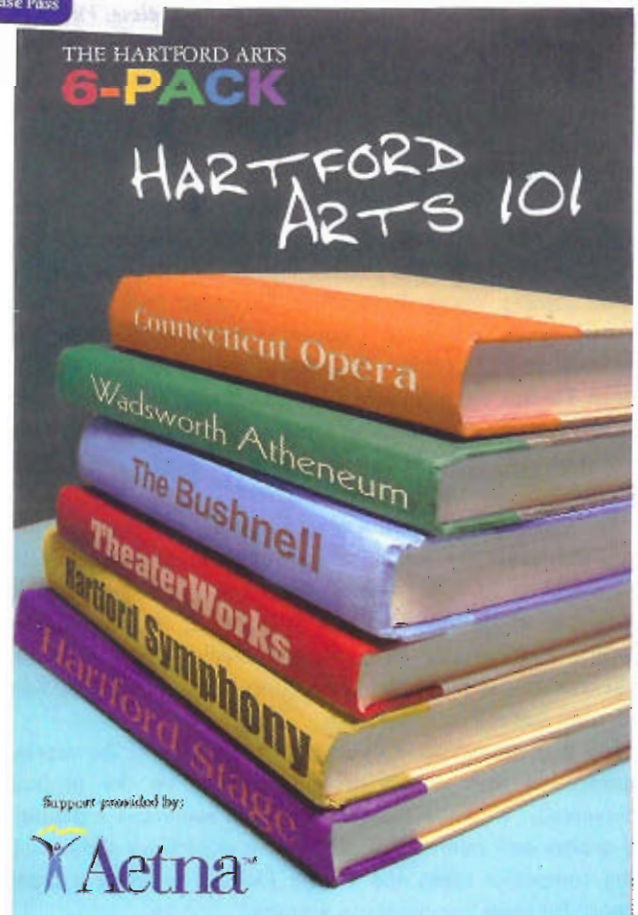
Connecticut Opera, Hartford Symphony Orchestra, TheaterWorks, and Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art.

"We all wanted to attract young professionals, but these younger people often don't know what to go to," says Linda Jackson, managing director of Connecticut Opera. "We knew we needed to make the program easy, affordable, and flexible." The group of organizations received support from the Aetna Foundation and other corporate sponsors, which has allowed them to print an attractive brochure and do some additional marketing of the program. Now in its third year, the Hartford collaboration has sold around 400 6-Packs each year.

**SOME COMMON THEMES**

What are some of the key factors that have made these programs successful?

**Be sure everyone is clear about his or her expectations for the program.** According to Linda Jackson, "We didn't start out assuming that all the 6-Pack patrons would eventually become full-price buyers or subscribers to any one organization. As long as we have the seats available, the fact that people are coming out



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at all is entirely to the good.” And sometimes there can be unexpected benefits: for instance, sampler subscriptions have been very popular as holiday gifts. Rachel May of Atlanta’s Synchronicity Performance Group says, “We’ve had theatre artists buy Samplers for their parents, [and] parents buy them for their teenagers.”


**Be willing to sacrifice a bit for the good of the group.**

Simplicity is crucial, so collaborators need to agree on a consistent offer and a price that will be attractive to prospective customers. In practice, this means that some of the participating theatres may be asked to sell seats at prices that are dramatically below their regular box office prices—and if one or two companies insist on holding out for more money, the program is unlikely to succeed.

Similarly, it’s important to provide attractive choices and flexibility for the prospective patrons, so companies must be willing to include even popular shows and performances as part of the package. If a company is looking at a joint subscription program as nothing more than a way to dump tickets to shows that are selling poorly, they could jeopardize the success of the entire campaign.

**Be sure your group has the ability to fund and manage the program.**

These programs need funding and management to succeed, and it can be difficult for overworked marketing managers to find either dollars or time in their regular activities to devote to a collaborative venture. Both the Boston and Hartford groups received outside funding; the Atlanta and New Jersey groups involved their local arts service organizations to assist with administration and fulfillment. Keeping costs low and finding creative ways to get the word out to prospective patrons is also key.

**Take a long-term perspective.** No audience development program is likely to pay off immediately. Audience development is a long process of relationship building that happens over time. The benefits of collaboration can pay off in ways other than immediate dollars: in visibility, brand identity, and stronger relationships among the managements within the theatre community. 

*To share your ideas about marketing collaboration, post your stories on the DramaBiz Magazine forum at [www.dramabiz.com/forum](http://www.dramabiz.com/forum) or email your ideas or questions to Janet Bailey, Janet Bailey Associates, at [janet@dramabiz.com](mailto:janet@dramabiz.com)*