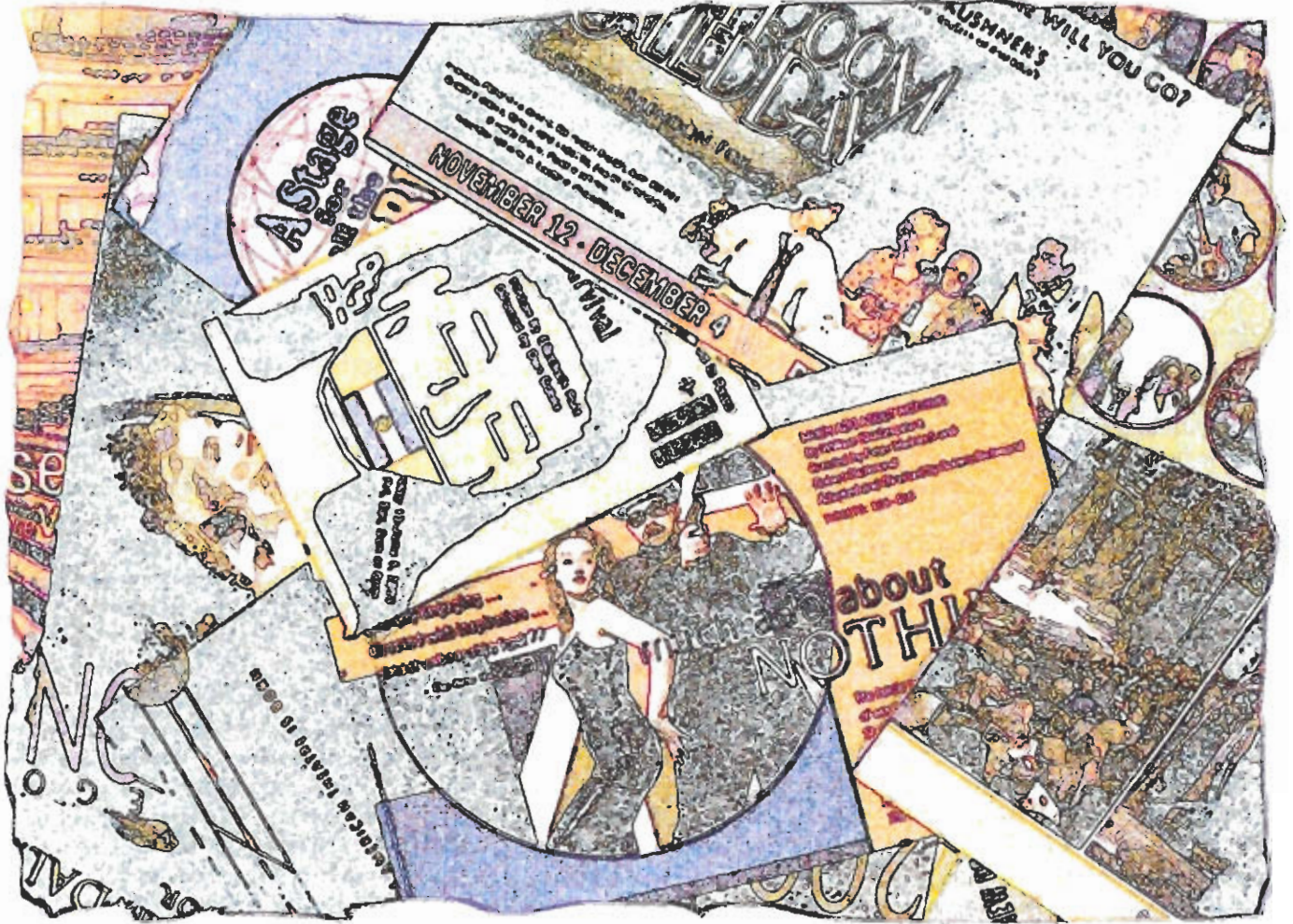


## How Direct is Your Communication?



Creating a personal relationship with your patrons pays off when you establish user-centric communications via direct mail and the Internet

BY JANET BAILEY

**U**NLIKE CARS, CREDIT CARDS OR CELL PHONES, theatre tickets are not a mass-market item. In corporate lingo, live theatre is a "niche" business, appealing to a small segment of the population. How small that segment is depends on the kind of theatre you are—obviously the visiting road company of "The Lion King" is going to be of interest to a broader audience than an experimental theatre company performing in someone's GARAGE.

But in nearly all cases, it makes little sense to spend scarce resources on mass-market advertising that broadcasts your message to hundreds of thousands of people, most of whom couldn't care less about what you're selling. Instead, the centerpiece of your marketing program should be direct communication with your current and prospective audience.

### YOUR POTENTIAL AUDIENCE

For direct communication to work, Job Number One is to build and maintain a database. According to Tom Holm of Enertex Marketing, which provides direct marketing services for arts and cultural organizations, "The biggest pitfall for organizations is mailing the wrong thing to the wrong list at the wrong time. Who you're sending to is more important than what you're sending."

The most promising candidates for future ticket purchases are people who have already purchased a ticket in the past, so at the very least you should be capturing names, addresses and e-mail addresses of everyone who attends your shows. You should also be sure to provide easy mechanisms for people to sign up to be on your mailing or e-mailing lists, including little enticements or opportunities to win prizes for those who share their data. You can then augment your list with



names of people who you think might also be interested, such as drama departments of local schools and colleges.

Be very careful about renting lists from commercial list brokers. These lists can be expensive and not particularly well targeted to theatre-goers. A better approach if you want to include new names in your mailing is to borrow or swap names with other arts organizations in your area. You know that those people are interested in the arts, even if they don't know your organization, and that they are willing to pay to attend.

## A COMPELLING MESSAGE

The next step is to craft your message. Your message should highlight those elements of your theatre that are both distinctive and compelling—that is, something that audiences are likely to get excited about, and something different from the other theatre companies in your market.

It's important to concentrate your message on what the recipient will think is important, which is not necessarily the same as what a producer or director thinks is important. Research with your current audience can help you understand the qualities of your company or of the theatre-going experience that appeal to people, so that you can emphasize these points in your communication to prospective audiences.

The piece itself—whether paper or electronic—should be well designed, with images that reflect your theatre's mission and the kind of work you do. The piece doesn't necessarily have to be flashy or expensive; in fact, a small or experimental theatre company would do better to avoid glitz and go with a simpler, even gritty, look.

## DIRECT MAIL

OK ... so now that you have a message and you know whom you want to convey it to ... how do you get it out there?

Most theatre companies continue to use direct mail to promote their full season offerings. A season subscription is a complicated product, with many different options for seating and scheduling. A subscription also carries a relatively high price tag, in terms of both dollars and investment of time throughout the season. A well-designed season brochure can provide all the information and explanations your prospective audience member requires to make his or her decision, while building enthusiasm for your season and reinforcing your brand identity. Moreover, a good season brochure can have a long shelf life: people often save the brochures, share them with friends and refer to them when considering both subscription and single-ticket purchases.

Many companies augment their season mailing with mailings for individual shows throughout the year, and with newsletters that provide deeper insights into the companies' productions or information about other activities like fundraising campaigns and educational programs. "We know that our audience likes to read about

our shows in advance," says Henry Lussier, director of marketing for the American Repertory Theatre in Cambridge, Mass. "We send out a quarterly newsletter called ARTicles that contains information about all the shows coming up in that quarter. But we also follow up with postcard reminders closer to the date of the show for some of the larger productions."

A significant bonus of direct mail is the ability to swap mailing lists with other organizations, in order to expand your reach and add

## DIRECT COMMUNICATION AT YOUR FINGERTIPS

### AudienceWorks

AudienceWorks offers multiple solutions to build and strengthen relationships with your patrons. Orbit and RetrieverPost are some of the products that allow you to attract new people to your performances as well as maintain an ongoing relationship with them. [www.audienceworks.com](http://www.audienceworks.com)

### Constant Contact®

Constant Contact is a web-based email campaign management solution designed and priced for small and medium sized associations, membership organizations and other nonprofit organizations. It includes everything you need to manage your email marketing campaigns from your desktop. [www.constantcontact.com](http://www.constantcontact.com)

### Direct Marketing Association

The Direct Marketing Association (DMA) is the leading global trade association of business and non-profit organizations using and supporting direct marketing tools and techniques. Whether it is customized information, legislative representation or specialized education the DMA offers members and non-members support. [www.the-dma.org](http://www.the-dma.org)

### Enerterx Marketing

In business for more than 30 years, Enerterx specializes in preparing and planning direct mail and telemarketing campaigns for arts organizations and non-profits. Their services span potential client list augmentation and database entry to tracking and analyzing customer buying habits. [www.enerterxmarketing.com](http://www.enerterxmarketing.com)

### International Internet Marketing Association

The International Internet Marketing Association (IIMA) is an organization that helps marketers understand the value and potential of marketing on the web and strives to raise all marketers' abilities to a new level. [www.iimaonline.org](http://www.iimaonline.org)

### Mindshare Interactive Campaigns, LLC

Mindshare partners with a variety of marketing, public relations, research and other communication firms to offer a mind-boggling array of marketing and technological services for any sort of marketing project, campaign or ongoing need. Based in Washington, D.C., Mindshare offers solution-based services. [www.mindshare.net](http://www.mindshare.net)

### Patron Technology

Patron Technology, based in New York, is an arts-oriented, Internet marketing software and service company that can provide full Website and e-marketing services from design and development or upgrade to the analysis and tracking of your projects. Or, they can install user-friendly software to help you maintain your own Website and mailing campaigns. [www.patrontechnology.com](http://www.patrontechnology.com)



## MAKING THE MOST OF THE CAN-SPAM ACT

Pushed by consumers tired of scrolling past volumes of spam to get to real e-mail, legislators wrote the CAN-SPAM Act of 2003 (Controlling the Assault of Non-Solicited Pornography and Marketing Act), which took effect in 2004.

Though the main targets of the CAN-SPAM Act are duplicitous Internet marketers, all businesses that contact their clients through bulk e-mailings for the purpose of selling a product or service are obligated to comply with the law.

You can look at this as a good opportunity to review the purpose and benefits of contacting your patrons by e-mail, while avoiding the pitfalls. Electronic marketing is a fast, inexpensive way to promote your theatre company and its programs. E-marketing should foster goodwill between you and your clients who love theatre.

### HERE'S HOW YOU CAN COMPLY WITH THE CAN-SPAM ACT:

1. Provide accurate information in the heading: the exact name of your company, the customer's correct name and a clear subject description.
2. Provide an easy opt-out mechanism within your e-mail. Prevention is best. Get the recipients' permission to receive your bulk e-mails whenever you gather their information online or offline. Still, if an e-mail recipient chooses to stop receiving your e-mails then you have 10 days to make sure he or she doesn't get another mailing from you. This also means that you can't pass his or her information along to another party.
3. Your mailings and Web site must contain your company's postal address.
4. You can't expand your database through shady practices, such as generating probable e-mail addresses or getting address lists from customers who didn't intend for you to have it in the first place.
5. Mainly for the pornographers, but good to keep in mind: Warn the client if there is any sexually oriented material included in the mailing.

If you outsource your online marketing and/or your Web site maintenance, make sure that your contractors abide by these rules or you will be liable for spamming. Still, Internet Service Providers can mistakenly perceive even legitimate and consensual e-mails as spam. You or a reputable Web site service company can get your mail through ISP spam filters by getting a "white list" designation. This means the ISP understands that the recipients want your e-mails.

Another part of the CAN-SPAM Act affects your Web site setup. To protect your company you should provide information to mail recipients about what will happen when they visit your site.

This brings us back to why we use the Internet for marketing. For the sake of clarity and goodwill between you and your patrons, your e-mailings and Web site should contain a privacy policy. This acknowledges the fact that your patrons' information will be treated with care.

### A GOOD POLICY SHOULD HAVE FOUR MAIN ELEMENTS:

1. The text should be simple, clear, thorough and accurate.
2. State that you will protect their information.
3. Patrons should know how you use their information. Inform them if you plan to share this data with third parties. Have a checkbox to ask for their permission. Make them comfortable by letting them know if you will absolutely not share their information.
4. Get their permission to receive future electronic mailings such as newsletters, fundraising letters, calendars and updates. Remind them that they always have the choice to opt out of these mailings.

Perhaps viewed as burdensome to marketers, the CAN-SPAM Act can actually enhance your online communication by obliging you to be clear, truthful and positive.

— C.M.

new prospects to your campaign. "Few organizations have a large enough mailing list to achieve their objectives all by themselves," says Enertex's Holm. "You need to keep marketing to fresh people. It has been encouraging in the last five or 10 years to see how people are willing to work with each other, and not worry they will lose buyers."

Direct marketing companies like Enertex provide database management services to individual companies, but Enertex has also brought companies together by creating what they call The Big List in a number of markets. In Philadelphia, one of their first markets, some 65 companies from various art forms contribute names to The Big List. In addition to facilitating list swaps, The Big List also provides participating companies with helpful management reports—for instance, data on the amount of overlap between their own audiences and those of other organizations in the market.

The biggest drawback to direct mail is, of course, the cost of design, list maintenance, paper, printing, mailing services and postage. These costs mean that for most companies mailings are infrequent, and some very small companies can find it impossible to use direct mail at all.

## E-COMMUNICATION

E-mail has rapidly become a central element in the marketing mix for most theatre companies. "As we move into the digital age, e-communication is becoming an increasingly important part of every marketer's toolbox," says Eugene Carr of Patron Technology, which provides the e-marketing service Patronmail for arts organizations. "For a few hundred dollars and a few hours' time, marketers can reach an audience that would have cost thousands of dollars and several weeks to reach by regular mail."

"We use e-mail every few weeks to keep in touch with people," says Jim Torres of SpeakEasy Stage Company, a mid-sized theatre company located in Boston and a client of Patronmail. "We usually announce the opening of each show ahead of time, perhaps with a discount offer for online purchase, then send another e-mail after opening with quotes from reviews." SpeakEasy also communicates from time to time about other news and activities of the organization. Says Torres, "We would never be able to afford the postage to send out these brief communications by regular mail."

The North Shore Music Theatre, a large company located in Beverly, Mass., takes a different approach, sending out a Patronmail newsletter every Friday afternoon. "We've been sending out a weekly e-mail for about six years, and have about 30,000 names on our e-mail list," says David James, director of marketing and audience development. "We try to include something about all our mission areas: our regular musical theatre productions, concerts, children's theatre, group sales and donor information."

The main drawback to e-mail lists is the difficulty of building and maintaining the list of e-mail addresses. Many people—especially older patrons—either don't use e-mail or are reluctant to divulge their e-mail addresses. Both Lussier of the ART and James of North Shore say that they have been able to capture only a small portion of e-mail addresses of their subscribers. And unlike postal mail, there is no mechanism for notification if a person's e-mail address changes.


E-mail can be easily personalized, and can incorporate links to additional information on the company's Web site. But as the amount of e-mail people receive increases, your company's messages can get lost in the clutter, making them easy to ignore or delete.

#### WHAT'S NEXT?

The communication landscape is changing rapidly, so what's next after direct mail and e-mail? According to Brian Reich of Mindshare Interactive Campaigns in Washington, D.C., communication via

mobile devices could be the next frontier. "There are currently 90 million people using the Internet, but more than 200 million have mobile phones, and people carry these devices with them all the time." Entertainment companies are even beginning to explore the development of mobile-specific programming.

New technologies will also enable organizations to get away from the one-size-fits-all concept of marketing messages. Companies can experiment with multiple messages, telling a different story to different segments—or even put out a range of content and let each recipient choose which elements are most relevant for him or her.

Finally, future communication with audiences is likely to involve more two-way interaction, as new technologies are used to enrich the audience's experience with your organization. Instead of just a one-way e-mail communication, you could add a mechanism to gather audience feedback, or start a blog on your Web site that invites comments. "People are pushing for greater engagement through online social networks, blogs and experiential games," says Reich. "Organizations have the opportunity now to have a more authentic conversation with their audience, and to learn more about their audience in the process." 

Visit our forums at [www.dramabiz.com/forum](http://www.dramabiz.com/forum) for more dialog on direct communications and view other marketing-related posts. You may also email your questions directly to Janet Bailey at [janet@dramabiz.com](mailto:janet@dramabiz.com).

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