

How Market Research Can Help You Understand Your Audience



PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF JANET BAILEY

Janet Bailey, founder and owner of Janet Bailey Associates

BY ANNE JACKSON, EDITORIAL ASSISTANT

Just the mention of research can turn any artist into a disappearing act. Eyes roll and yawns form with the mention of audience segmentation and response rates. However, more and more theatres are finding that collecting audience demographic and preference information can better ensure a successful season.

According to Janet Bailey, founder and owner of Janet Bailey Associates, a strategic marketing consulting firm dedicated to the arts and theatre, research is a tool that can be used by all types and sizes of theatre organizations.

"Most of the larger organizations in the arts use research, in many cases very sophisticated research," states Bailey.

"Smaller organizations often don't, either because they don't realize they need it or can't afford it on their own."

Bailey stresses the importance of research as the starting point for understanding whom you should be targeting. "Audience development is a relationship-building process that takes place over time, and that can't take place without knowing something about the audience. And, the best way to attract new audience members is to understand the current audience members so that you are better able to go out and find more of them."

Bailey outlines the different forms or research typically used in theatre:

Quantitative research (questionnaire-based surveys) is useful to uncover the following information:

1. Basic demographics—age, income, education, etc., which can be useful on its own and in identifying particular segments. This information is also very helpful for fundraising.

2. Buying behavior—why they go to theatre, how they make their choices, what newspapers (if any) they read, etc. This information directly fuels your marketing strategies.

3. Attitudes and beliefs—this reveals how important the arts are to them. These results may feed into marketing strategies, but they are most useful in communicating with political leaders and the media.

Qualitative research (through open-ended responses on a questionnaire, or through focus groups) can help an organization understand softer issues. For example, you may want to understand how people view the particular company, how it stacks up against other organizations or how audience members might react to changes in strategy or programming.

OUT-OF-BOX IDEA

In 2004, the Theatre Arts Marketing Alliance (TAMA), an informal association of 20 mid-size, small and fringe theatre companies in the greater Boston area, worked with Janet Bailey and with staff from arts service organizations StageSource and ArtsBoston, to design a survey that would yield information about their audiences—who they are, how they make their theatre-going decisions and how the companies might best communicate with them. They decided upon a questionnaire that would be

distributed to patrons at selected performances by each theatre company.

Bailey worked with the different companies collectively and individually to make sure that the questionnaire would not be the desired results. This group was looking for basic marketing information — their audience's other entertainment options, how they make purchasing decisions, pricing and what media they use. They also included a couple of open-ended questions to elicit some qualitative responses.

"We went through several drafts, and gathered feedback at many points in the process," explains Bailey. "We also tested the questionnaire with a small sample of general people (not theatre company employees) before finalizing it, to be certain that the questions were clear and that it didn't take too long to fill it out."

Bailey points out that it is important that the questionnaire not be too long, because you can't ask people to take much more than about five minutes of their time when they have come for an evening at the theatre. The participating companies were very sensitive to this situation, and understood that they couldn't load up the questionnaire with a lot of extra questions.

To encourage responses, ushers circulated through the audience at intermission, drawing attention to the questionnaire and handing out pencils. Staffers also made curtain speeches and placed signage in the lobby. As further incentive, anyone who handed in a completed survey could enter to win a prize. One person was selected from each company's entries to win a pair of tickets to another theatre company, and one grand prize winner was selected from all entries to win 20 pairs of tickets.

Bailey cautions that it is important to get as high a response rate as possible, both to ensure that you have large enough numbers for analysis and to be sure that you don't hear only from those people with strong feelings, positive or negative. She recommended that the smaller companies get at least 125 completed surveys and larger companies a minimum of 250.

"In all, we received over 4,000 responses, out of 15,000 or so surveys handed out, which is an excellent response rate," remarks Bailey.

To tabulate responses, Bailey used Survey Monkey (surveymonkey.com), a very inexpensive but powerful online service, to

process the results. Some companies entered their own responses, while others returned their questionnaires to StageSource, which then mobilized interns and volunteers to input the responses into Survey Monkey.

Once all the results were in, TAMA held a workshop to discuss the results and to work together to identify a few initiatives that they might tackle jointly. In addition, each company got a copy of their own results to benchmark against the collective sample.

"This was actually one of the main benefits for the participating companies — the ability to compare their own results against the larger group," states Bailey. "We were also able to generate media attention by publicly disclosing the results of the study."

Some of the findings from the TAMA study include a confirmation of the trend of audiences becoming more last-minute in their ticket-buying behavior.

"I don't think we ever realized just how dramatic the shift has become," says Bailey. "Less than 9% of the under-35 age group purchases their tickets 'well in advance,' compared to 45% of the 55-and-over age group."

Conversely, more than two-thirds of the under-35 age group purchase tickets on the day of the show or a few days ahead, compared to only about one-fourth of the 55-and-over age group. This has huge implications for the marketing tactics that companies will need to use to communicate with these two different segments.

In addition to asking demographic questions to profile your patrons, consider the following questions to better understand how to market to your audience.

• Have you been to this theatre before? Yes No If yes, how did you hear about us?

- Ad in Newspaper Radio Advertisement Article in Newspaper
 Season Ticket Holder Direct Mail Web Site Friend/Family
 Other _____

• What prompted you to select this performance as one you'd like to attend?

- Acting
 Advertising (newspaper, direct mail, email, etc.)
 Friend/family recommendation
 Friend/family in production or works at the theatre
 The play itself
 Ticket price/value for money
 Other _____

• How frequently do you attend the following types of entertainment?

- A. Rarely/Never (0-1 x/year), B. Occasionally (2-4 x/year), or C. Frequently (5+ x/year)
Art gallery ___ Ballet ___ Broadway-type shows ___
Charitable/Fundraising events ___ Classical music concerts/opera ___
Concerts — popular & other ___ Dance performances (non-ballet) ___
Movies ___ Museums ___ Professional sports ___

• What is the maximum you would consider paying for a ticket to a similar production?

- \$50 or more \$40-49 \$30-39 \$20-29 \$10 -19 under \$10

• Do you patronize restaurants, coffee shops or other businesses in the area when you go to the theatre?

- Yes, almost all of the time Sometimes Not usually/never

• If I were trying to reach someone like you to tell them about this or any performance at this theatre, which media would be the best to use?

- Advertising. Where? _____
 Radio. Which stations? _____
 Newspaper. Which ones? _____
 Direct Mail. How frequent? _____
 Television advertising. Which stations? _____
 Web/email. How frequent? _____
 Other _____

Research Data Ready Made

IBISWorld/ Mindbranch - Provides a detailed analysis of the Theater Companies and Dinner Theaters industry in the U.S., including key growth trends, the competitive environment and the key issues facing the industry. Downloadable copy for \$45. www.mindbranch.com/products/RS38-1133.html

Opinion Dynamics Corporation - Research designed to help determine the critical factors that impact your organization's ability to build, grow and sustain audiences, and then to create and implement strategies that effectively reach those audiences. www.opiniondynamics.com/ODCAudienceResearchBrochure.pdf

Performing Arts Research Coalition - A groundbreaking collaborative project created to improve and coordinate the way performing arts organizations gather information on our sector, so that we can offer a more unified and factually based voice on issues of common concern, and aid the performing arts in developing a national model for arts research collaboration. <http://www.operaamerica.org/parc/>

TAMA - Represents an unprecedented collaboration among theatre companies in the Boston area. The 20 companies combined have a total annual budget of approximately \$6.8 million and serve about 250,000 audience members annually. <http://www.bostontama.org/survey/index.html>

U.S. Census Data - Access data from the 2004 community study which provides a general overview of various communities across the country by zip code. http://factfinder.census.gov/home/saff/main.html?_lang=en

Bailey also reports on some other surprising bits of information:

- few people in the audience have children under 18
- the Internet has become a prevalent information source
- the degree to which the audience enjoys the intimacy of the smaller theatre spaces
- the general appreciation for the quality of the productions done on a shoestring budget.

Overall, implementation costs were minimal. Volunteers and interns performed the majority of the data entry. Printing of the survey forms incurred only a minor cost. Also, Survey Monkey is a relatively cheap resource, with licensing for under \$20 per month. The group was also able to secure funding from the Boston Foundation and Fleet Bank (now Bank of America) to underwrite the costs of Bailey's professional services.


Bailey adds, "It's important to remember that there are other ways to conduct quantitative surveys besides on paper at the theatre---telephone, mail and email all have

advantages and disadvantages. This happened to be one of the more cost-effective methods for us to use."

Always remember that you don't need to be a research expert to interpret results, but it is helpful to hire someone with an outside perspective. "You need someone with a marketing sensibility to connect the dots and ask the 'so what?' questions," Bailey says.

Collecting the data is important. Interpreting the data and acting on it is even more important.

To read more about the TAMA survey, visit www.bostontama.org/survey/index.html.

Janet Bailey Associates provides marketing, strategy, development, organizational and communications consulting services to arts and other nonprofit organizations. For information, visit www.janetbaileyassociates.com or call (617) 971-9383. 

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