

Consumerism and Orderly Marketing of the Performing Arts

Bruce Leto, Jr.
111 Sullivan Street, Apt 2BR
New York, NY. 10011
Bgl234@nyu.edu
New York University

An orderly approach to marketing performing arts in our current dynamic environment involves a detailed assessment of customer values and tastes prior to creating a program that is germane and experientially tailored to him/her – **a customer-oriented approach**. Professor Alan Andreasen, in *Marketing or Selling the Arts: An Orientational Dilemma*, attempts to distinguish between a customer-oriented marketing approach and one solely concerned with bolstering ticket sales. “What is required [in successful marketing of the performing arts] is a pervasive point of view that, in effect, uses the customer as the touchstone for evaluating, planning, and carrying out virtually everything the organization does (Andreasen, 12).” Andreasen believes that a key problem many performing arts organizations are facing, in regards to marketing, is that they are stuck in “pre-marketing (11),” myopic sales-based mentalities. Instead, arts administrators must leverage social media, consumer preferences, and relatable programming to attract new audience members.

Andreasen believes the outdated sales-based marketing approach is problematic because it is more focused on short-term augmentation of ticket sales rather than on conscientious, subtle attraction of potential long-term audience members. In addition, the “sales-oriented” approach does not fully take into consideration the desires, needs, and expectations of consumers. Authors Bonita Kolb, Philip Kotler, David Scott, and Thomas Wolf all agree with Andreasen that the appropriate marketing platforms for nonprofit arts organizations must be focused on the consumer.

“Selling-oriented managers tend to feel deep down inside that the major reason the organization doesn’t have greater sales or attendance is that consumers simply don’t appreciate deeply enough what a truly stimulating and enriching experience awaits them were they, for example, to visit the museum, attend a play, or hear a concert (14).” Sales-oriented managers view consumer ignorance, lacking intellect, and apathy as major barriers towards their organization’s success- the consumer/audience member is thus viewed as the *enemy* (14).

Performing arts administrators must determine the following: why an audience member purchases tickets, what he/she prefers to hear at a concert, how much he/she is willing to pay, and what other arts institutions (substitutes) he/she

would typically attend in lieu of the specified organization. A consumer-focused arts administrator should also utilize social media and blogging to more accurately determine the predilections of potential audience members. After collecting and analyzing the apposite data, the arts administrator would then try to create an organizational product that provides its consumers with *meaningful, experiential involvement* and programmatic *relevance*. In this essay, I will address: past trends and difficulties in performing arts marketing, consumer understanding, the nuanced delineation between marketing and selling, and the importance of social media in present-day product marketing. Finally, I will offer recommendations for orderly marketing of the performing arts.

One key issue that many performing arts organizations have faced in previous marketing efforts is the belief that they are *educating* consumers through erudite, high-culture products. As Thomas Wolf astutely claims in *Managing a Nonprofit Organization*, “Many nonprofit organizations pride themselves not on designing products for consumers but rather on educating consumers’ taste and preferences (Wolf, 153).” The problem with the consumer education approach is that it is outdated and not dynamic enough. Nonprofit performing arts institutions must design programming, services, and products that cater to using consumer preferences, data gleaned from social media, and other consumer interactive platforms. Programming for shows and concerts must be up-to-date and relevant for audience members. In addition, Wolf mentions several other marketing errors that nonprofit organizations have committed in the past.

A common promotional pitfall is to assume that “the more you say in a promotional device the better (159).” Instead, Wolf advocates for “short, carefully selected messaging,” which he believes is more successful in promoting a show or a concert. This type of efficient communication has undoubtedly been made easier through the ubiquity of the internet. Another historical marketing shortcoming for many cultural institutions has been missing the easy opportunities to acquire names, addresses, and other pertinent information (159). Wolf believes that nonprofit performing arts organizations must incentivize constituents (perhaps through discounted tickets and/or membership benefits) to provide email addresses, phone numbers, addresses, and other forms of personal information. This would allow for easier contact of past and present audience members. Lastly, Wolf mentions the tendency of many nonprofit organizations to oversell a product or service (159). Rachel Grossman’s perspective in *Tapping Back Into Lost Audiences* is in agreement with Wolf that there should be more of a focus on the attraction of *new* audience members, who might serve as future organizational benefactors.

Another issue that has traditionally presented itself as a barrier to the success of nonprofit performing arts organizations is the *lacking relevance* in programmatic content to audience members. In the performing arts marketing book, titled *Standing Room Only*, author Philip Kotler directly addresses this problem. “Although much art deals with universal topics such as life, death, fear, joy, love, war, and peace, there is a perception that fine arts reflect the taste of a very small cultural elite (Kotler, 12).” Many audience members have passed up opportunities to attend performing arts events because they might have felt that the presented material was overly intellectual or irrelevant to them. Similarly, other

consumers of popular culture have found certain forms of art as effeminate and/or highfalutin. Kotler fears that the “art-oriented approach (18)” to marketing has alienated many prospective consumers from purchasing tickets. Why would prospective ticket-buyers want to attend a show if they do not feel that they can relate to the presented material?

Author Bonita Kolb, in *Marketing for Cultural Organization*, similarly addresses some of the previous struggles that cultural organizations have faced in regards to marketing. Kolb maintains that in an increasingly technological world (with easy access to viewing art), we must understand the consumer before orienting our marketing efforts towards him/her. How does the new consumer of art differ from the old arts consumer?

According to Kolb, the modern-day consumer has shifted from acting as a “traditional audience member” to a “cultural consumer (25).” The new consumer is both interested in culture and *entertainment*. He/she wants to enjoy both high AND popular culture, Western AND foreign cultural experiences. The consumer is dynamic, reflective, concerned with social values/ideals, and seeks an element of *involvement* in his/her viewing experience. “The public no longer looks to the cultural organization to provide an internal meaning for the art, but to provide the raw material with which individuals can create their own meaning (41).” The new arts consumer attends a symphonic performance, play, or operatic production with this very question in mind: “How does it relate to me? Moreover, “how does *this* arts experience reflect my *own life experiences*?” Modern-day arts consumers seek programmatic relevance and intimacy that are congruent with their own (and society’s) values. The values of audience members today are undoubtedly much different from those of their predecessors. How can a performing arts organization fulfill its artistic mission while leveraging societal values and ideals of its consumers?

One way to better understand the ideals of a consumer might be to examine him/her through the lens of Maslow’s “Hierarchy of Needs (Kolb, 97).” According to Maslow, culture is desired only when the bare necessities of the consumer have been met. Perhaps arts organizations could use this model to better comprehend the underlying reasons *why* many lower-income audience members are not purchasing tickets – basic physiological needs are not met while attending cultural events. What would happen if performing arts organizations/cultural institutions were to start providing brown-bagged lunches, complimentary water bottles, and participatory community forums to audience members before or after shows?

There are many other appropriate ways of shifting to a consumer-oriented marketing approach, which authors Kolb, Kotler, Andreasen, and Scott advocate in their respective publications. Kotler asserts that performing arts administrators must first assess the factors influencing consumer behavior before implementing effective programmatic and marketing strategies. These factors include: macroenvironmental trends (social, political, environmental), cultural factors (nationality, subcultures, social class), social factors (reference groups, opinion leaders), psychological factors (personality, beliefs), and personal factors (Kotler, 69).

Concurrent with assessing these external factors, arts administrators must also conduct *needs recognition* assessments of constituents prior to evaluating and designing new programs. Some straightforward aspects of this assessment involve data collection and audience surveys (128). Conceivably, arts administrators would partner with social media sites such as Facebook, which would provide them with the opportunity to collect consumer data through analytics and randomized consumer preference polls. The remaining aspects of needs recognition assessments involve subtler tactics – i.e. “scanning” today’s culture by looking at magazines, blogs, movies, books, social media, etc. (69). How the organization communicates its message(s) to audience members is crucial in effectively attracting or deterring new audience members. In our current digitized industry environment, effective communication to audiences *must* involve incorporation of social media and the internet.

Author David Scott, in *New Rules of Marketing & PR*, describes how the web, blogging, and social media have all changed the standards for marketing and public relations. “Social networks allow people all over the world to share content and connect with the people and the companies [that] they do business with (24).” Social media allows administrators and marketing staff members to observe a candid glimpse of constituent preferences. Due to its transparency, social media can oftentimes serve as a more efficient way of gathering crucial information than conducting costly surveys and timely discussion groups. A modern alternative to these discussion groups is participation in blogs and online forums, as Scott recommends. “Your best customers participate in online forums – *so should you...*the internet is like a massive focus group with uninhibited customers offering up their thoughts for free (Scott, 47).”

Rapper, artist, and activist Kellee Maize advocates that it is imperative for artists to use social media as a way of turning “followers” into friends (Maize, 1). This is one of her recommendations in *How I “Made It” in the Music Industry: My Top 10 Tips*. Maize suggests that artists must attempt to answer every fan’s “tweet”, comment, and message, as well as “following” them on sites such as Twitter and Instagram. Lastly, she advocates building long-lasting online relationships with fans as a way of personally reaching out to them. Artist/fan interaction can assist in bridging the “gap” between performer and audience member. Increased consumer access to entertainment on the web and through social media provides arts administrators with opportunities to participate in e-forums, market through social media, and brush up on current events.

A recent example involving a world-renown mezzo-soprano appealing to the masses in an unconventional (and unprecedented) fashion demonstrates the importance of social media in performing arts marketing. Joyce DiDonato, a famous operatic mezzo-soprano, was “invited” to sing the National Anthem at Game 7 of the 2014 World Series through a series of hashtags that appeared on social media, reading: #letJoycesing. Performing at the Kansas City Royals ballpark for the World Series was particularly apropos for DiDonato, a resident of Kansas City and former attendee of KC Royals games. “I’ll never forget my father saving up to take his seven kids to a Royals game’, DiDonato said (Crouse, 1).” DiDonato’s acquiescence to her fans’ social media request was significant for several reasons.

DiDonato's interaction with her fans through social media signifies an abridged "gap" between classical music fans and performers. This alteration of perceived boundaries between performer and audience member is something that many performing arts organizations are trying to emulate. One significant problem in performing arts marketing is that many audience members do not feel as if they can easily relate to the *performers*. However, DiDonato is both a charismatic and relatable performer. Moreover, she made herself *relevant*, not only as a performer, but also as a fellow citizen. Kolb might even argue that events, such as this one, might help the listener to better perceive an individual association with the presented art form. "The extent to which an individual feels associated with the art form and each other can help us to understand the motivation for attending (Kolb, 51)."

Consequently, DiDonato marketed herself (and her operatic performance) to the *consumer*. Perhaps DiDonato's acquiescence to her enthusiastic fans on social media was an example of the synergy that Kolb describes in *Marketing for Cultural Organizations*. DiDonato, in this instance, presented her craft in a way that was not over-intellectual, snobbish, or unintelligible. I predict that synergies with substitute entertainment options, such as sporting events, will become an increasingly popular marketing tool for performing arts organizations in the future. It is also important to recognize that the KC Royals having someone like DiDonato perform at their stadium is beneficial for their own reputation. Performing artists benefit from association with other leisure activities; just as athletes, writers, and movie stars conversely benefit from association with performing artists. The bottom line is this: social media will speak, and performing artists must answer. Successful marketing of performing artists involves being informed of trends, events, and happenings on social media. Increasingly, performing artists/arts organizations must be malleable and respond to consumer demands.

Additionally, some performing arts organizations are even experimenting with audience interaction and artistic collaboration via social media *during* performances. In June 2013, a group called the Mechanical Heart Theater Company put on a show named *#Hashtag*, during which audience members were encouraged to "tweet" from their seats while referencing @theatrehashtag in their respective posts (Nelson, 1). NPR writer Noah Nelson asserted that the production *#Hashtag* was indicative of a conversation taking place through social media; a conversation in which audience members were shrewdly (and temporarily) recruited as subtle members of Mechanical Heart Theater Company's marketing team.

On February 4, 2014, audience members of Opera Philadelphia were similarly encouraged to "tweet" the Opening Night performance of Osvaldo Golijov's *AINADAMAR*, using the hashtag #lorcaopera. A conglomerate of social media enthusiasts, bloggers, and opera lovers happily "tweeted" while soprano Maria Montenegro belted out sonorous vocal melodies. Arts administrators must incorporate Opera Philadelphia's and MHTC's ingenuity in their marketing efforts not only to facilitate the spread of information, but also to better engage and entertain current audience members during performances. Social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter are becoming ubiquitous in our everyday lives, and arts administrators should avail themselves of it.

From all of this aforementioned material: what is an orderly approach to marketing the performing arts? Should performing arts organizations (and all other nonprofit cultural institutions, for that matter) continue to follow a sales-based approach to marketing without reliance upon social media? Will these organizations compromise their artistic mission and purpose by reaching out to prospective audience members and donors through social media and the internet? Is there any hope for staid, traditional cultural organizations in building their fan bases and programmatic material to adhere to an arts-oriented approach to marketing?

In my opinion, an *orderly* approach to marketing the performing arts is just as Alan Andreasen expounds: a customer-oriented approach. Performing arts organizations *must* deviate from an intuitive sales-based approach to ticket sales and choose ticket prices that, even if lower than the profit-maximizing threshold, will augment the number of audience members who attend a given performance, as Kotler advocates. Performing arts organizations must also be active in social media: observing demographic trends, creating fan pages, and participating in online forums to get a better sense of what consumers are willing to purchase and why. These organizations must, as Grossman suggests in *Tapping Back Into Lost Audiences*, figure out a way of attracting new constituents by determining which audience members have been implicitly (or explicitly) left out.

Moreover, performing arts organizations must determine how to successfully partner with substitutes for ticket sales subscriptions. I suspect that more fans of the Philadelphia Orchestra would attend a performance if their ticket included a complementary ticket to a Philadelphia Eagles game, or even a discounted one. Opera Philadelphia and the Philadelphia Phillies, however, have already experimented with cross-entertainment marketing synergy. In 2013, three members of Opera Philadelphia – Jackie Dunleavy, Carole Latimer, and Robert Davidson – sang an operatic rendition of “Take Me Out to the Ball Game” at Citizens Bank Park, home of the Philadelphia Phillies. Arts administrators must continue to incorporate similar methods of “cross-fertilization” between sports and the performing arts in marketing platforms. These types of leisure activities are the main substitutes that performing arts organizations are competing with: why not take advantage of potential partnerships?

In addition, performing arts organizations must institute programming that is relevant to their audience members. Perhaps orchestras could perform a greater number of arrangements of pop, rock, and jazz tunes for younger audience members. Lastly, cultural organizations must continue to incorporate discriminatory pricing (Kotler) into their respective platforms for ticket sales. I believe there is no reason that a financially struggling urban student has to purchase a concert ticket at the same price as a wealthy 40-year old professional. Public transportation to performance spaces must also be made more easily accessible for various demographic groups.

In an increasingly dynamic, social, and flexible arts industry, one thing is certain – cultural organizations must be more cognizant of the consumer in their respective platforms. Programming must be relevant and experiential, pricing –

affordable, and performing artists – germane. It is absolutely imperative for performing arts organizations to work *with* consumers rather than *against* them.

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