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Audience Development of an Emerging Theatre Company in Charlotte, North Carolina

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AUDIENCE DEVELOPMENT OF AN EMERGING THEATRE
COMPANY IN CHARLOTTE, NORTH CAROLINA

A Thesis
Presented to the Faculty
Of the
College of Visual and Performing Arts
In Partial Fulfillment
Of the
Requirements for the Degree
Of
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By

Jennifer Quigley

Abstract

Many studies exist on the topic of audience development for arts organizations. This paper specifically seeks to study the methods of audience development for emerging theatre companies in Charlotte, North Carolina in the early 21st century. My research compares published information on audience development to that of a successful emerging theatre company. After comparing this information, I provide an eight step guide of audience development strategies for emerging theatre companies.

Acknowledgements

The journey to completing my Master's thesis has been at times exhausting, nerve-wracking, and lonely. However, it has also been one of the most fulfilling achievements I have experienced. I thank my parents, family, and friends who supported me throughout this process.

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Chapter 1

Audience Development for Theatres

My Interactions with and Relationship to Audience Development in Charlotte, North Carolina

My professional goal is to open and manage a theatre company that enriches the community it serves. I have been studying and participating in theatre for 17 years and I have seen the transformative effects this art form can have on its participants – for those who create theatre as well as those who view it.

There's a kind of moment that everyone who loves theater lives for... It's the moment when, thanks to some particularly sad or funny or surprising event onstage, a bunch of strangers sitting in the dark suddenly turns into something else entirely: an audience. Sometimes it's a shared laugh, sometimes a shared gasp and sometimes just a shared intensity of attention that creates an almost supernatural hush throughout the room. But the key is that it's shared. When 500 people -- or 50 -- are feeling the same thing at the same time, they aren't strangers anymore; they're a community. (Kennedy, 2004, para. 1 & 2)

Theatre utilizes shared human experiences to create bonds between people who might not otherwise share any connection. These bonds bring us closer to the reality of a community enriched through the arts.

I have participated in the theatre community of Charlotte, North Carolina since 1999. Throughout these 12 years, I have served as actress, stage manager and costumer for several theatre companies, including: Off-Tryon Theatre Company, Queen City

Theatre Company, Central Piedmont Community College, and Chickspeare.

Additionally, I have been an audience member for the theatrical productions of established theatre companies such as: Actor's Theatre of Charlotte, Children's Theatre of Charlotte, Theatre Charlotte, Carolina Actors Studio Theatre, Charlotte Repertory Theatre, Actors Scene Unseen, and Blumenthal Performing Arts Center; emerging theatre companies that transitioned into established companies such as: Barebones, Epic Arts Repertory Theatre, Off-Tryon Theatre Company, Shakespeare Carolina; and current emerging theatre companies such as: Collaborative Arts, Citizens of the Universe, Machine Theatre, and Queen City Theatre Company. For the purpose of this research, an emerging theatre company is a non-professional theatre company producing for no more than five years. Please see Appendix for a glossary of terms.

During my time spent with the theatre community, I have seen audience sizes fluctuate greatly. I have attempted to purchase tickets to a show only to find it sold out. Conversely, I once performed in a production that was cancelled due to lack of audience and the two audience members in attendance volunteered to come back another night. Each theatre company in Charlotte has seen fluctuations in audience size – some productions are a success, some are failures, and some just fall in the middle. Audience instability makes it difficult for many theatres to continue to operate, especially emerging theatre companies. Theatres have to address audience development issues, develop revenue generating schemes outside of ticket sales, or face the possibility of closing their doors.

Through my involvement in the Charlotte theatre community I have come to believe there is a lack of communication between theatres and the community. With well

over two million residents in Charlotte, I wonder why some Charlotte theatre companies are unable to fill their 30 to 400 seat houses. Are these companies not producing the type of theatre in which the community is interested? Are these theatre companies not making their presence known in the community? How can an emerging theatre company in Charlotte hope to sell enough tickets to survive when established companies are finding difficulty with the task? I fully believe Charlotte can have a theatre community as strong as our business community, but in order for that to happen there must be an outreach to the general population.

One emerging theatre company in Charlotte, Queen City Theatre Company (QCTC), has repeatedly found success with its productions over its four year history. What is QCTC doing to keep seats filled during its formative years? What can other emerging theatre companies learn from Queen City Theatre Company?

In a community where some theatres are struggling to maintain enough audience members to support production budgets, or in some cases to continue operating, it is clear theatre administrators throughout the Charlotte community are facing difficulty with audience development. As someone who makes an effort to attend productions at every theatre company, I see audience sizes vary drastically. I have learned that theatre companies are often able to entice new audience members based on the content of a particular production, but not develop a relationship with newcomers in order to find out what would make them want to return. Audience development tactics are therefore used as a seat filling tool versus a relationship building tool.

Emerging theatre companies need to have a firm grasp on their goals for audience development as well as their artistic goals. It is simply not enough to have a fully

developed idea of what plays or musicals to produce. It is the emerging theatre company's responsibility to make its presence known to the community, connect with audience members, and offer them productions that provide entertainment, personal growth, and the artistic fulfillment they are seeking.

My research shows that Queen City Theatre Company is using a combination of known audience development tools as well as innovative measures to attract and retain audience members. In this study, I will compare and contrast the information from literature on the topic of audience development with interviews from both the managing and artistic directors of Queen City Theatre Company. Finally, I will present an audience development guide for emerging theatre companies in Charlotte, North Carolina.

Research Findings of Previous Audience Development Studies

Audience development is a crucial component of any arts organization. After all, without an audience, why does the organization exist? There are many studies prior to this research which seek to understand how to successfully develop an audience. These studies focus not only on what methods arts organizations use to develop an audience, but also what motivates audience attendance.

In order to understand what audience development methods to use, we must first understand what audience development is. Donna Walker-Kuhne (2005) defines audience development as "the cultivation and growth of long-term relationships, firmly rooted in a philosophical foundation that recognizes and embraces the distinctions of race, age, sexual orientation, physical disability, geography and class" (p. 10). Beyond

the idea of merely “filling seats,” audience development is about attracting community members to the theatre and making them *want* to become members of the audience.

Theatre companies must first invite members of the community to their productions, get the individuals to attend, then develop a relationship with the individuals so they will return. The title of a production alone can encourage an individual to venture out to a theatre company to which he or she has never been, but how does the theatre company entice the individual to return for the next production, especially if the individual is unfamiliar with the title?

Arts organizations must recognize that audience development is a continual process. For instance, if an arts organization builds a following of approximately 1,000 individuals and never seeks any additional audience members, it will have a problem. The 1,000 individuals will not live forever and eventually the arts organizations will no longer have an audience. The Wallace Foundation has a “particular interest in developing efforts to attract two important groups to the arts: 18-to 34-year-olds, who are a declining share of the overall audience, and families with children under 12, who represent the audiences of the future” (DeVita, 2008, p. 6).

The Wallace Foundation’s President, M. Christine DeVita further explains, “Unless we get better at building demand and appreciation for the arts, we will not have the strong healthy cultural life that our communities deserve and that arts organizations need in order to flourish” (2008, p. 4). To achieve the demand and appreciation for the arts, the Wallace Foundation seeks first to understand audience development from the audience’s perspective by studying what motivates audience members to attend arts

events. The studies focus on a variety of demographics as well as a variety of arts genres. I will discuss some of the specific Wallace Foundation findings in chapter three.

In *Running Theaters: Best Practices for Leaders and Managers*, Duncan M. Webb (2004) discusses the challenges facing theatre administrators, competition for individual's free time, competition with other organizations' marketing strategies (arts and non-arts alike), theatre administrators often lacking marketing experience, and the question of how much money to pour into a marketing budget. Webb provides advice on combatting these challenges in theatre company marketing and specific suggestions will be discussed in chapter three.

Within my research I have found the most common means of audience development are: communication and marketing. Communication includes word of mouth, building relationships with patrons, phone calls, mailings, emails, and social media. To learn what methods Queen City Theatre Company utilizes to develop its audience, I interviewed the company's artistic and managing directors.

Chapter 2

Interview Results

Queen City Theatre Company has produced theatre in Charlotte, North Carolina since March 2007. QCTC is operated by Glenn T. Griffin, the Artistic Director and Kristian Wedolowski, the Managing Director. Each season, QCTC produces four shows, a combination of plays and musicals. "QCTC wishes to present theatre that celebrates the many different races, religions, genders, and sexual orientations that exist in both Charlotte, NC and the world." (Queen City Theatre Company, n.d.)

What Methods Does Queen City Theatre Company Use to Inform the Community of Productions?

There are a variety of methods to inform the public about a theatre's productions and Queen City Theatre Company has used many of them based on the individual characteristics of each production. Some have garnered great results and others have provided little help in terms of audience development. Queen City Theatre Company chooses which methods to use based on the production. First, we will discuss the successful methods for QCTC, second the less successful methods, and finally the methods which have failed.

Newspaper. Queen City Theatre Company has a partnership with *Charlotte Creative Loafing* and advertises for each show in this newspaper. *Creative Loafing* is a free, weekly newspaper which describes itself as making "its distinctive mark in the Charlotte market by emphasizing quality writing, hard hitting stories, and the most complete arts, entertainment and events listings in the area" (Charlotte Creative Loafing,

n.d., para 1). Occasionally, QCTC will advertise in the *Charlotte Observer*, a paid-subscription, daily newspaper whose mission is to, “deliver what people need to discover and understand the region” (Charlotte Observer, n.d., para. 1). QCTC’s decision about with which newspaper to advertise is based on the production and its level of mass appeal. Wedolowski feels it is important to maintain communication with local newspapers. He sends press releases, production photos, history of the production, and any other information the newspapers might need to inform readers about upcoming productions. *Creative Loafing* features a section on upcoming events in the Charlotte area in each publication and will often include a feature on one upcoming theatre production – an incentive for any theatre company to provide information in order to receive free publicity.

Theatre’s email. Queen City Theatre Company utilizes email to communicate upcoming productions and will send one email per week during a production’s run to remind patrons of production dates. Wedolowski tracks the activity of the emails – who opens them, who forwards them to others, who clicks on the links to purchase tickets, and who clicks on the link to go to the company’s website. According to Wedolowski, approximately 85% of QCTC’s audience members purchase tickets online, which leads Wedolowski to believe audience members most likely learned about the show via the web through emails, Facebook, QCTC’s Website, or other websites promoting Queen City Theatre Company.

Social media. QCTC’s directors believe that Facebook is a major component of audience development, but it is losing its impact. Facebook is a social media site where individuals can connect with friends, family, acquaintances, and strangers and can share

information, likes and dislikes, photos, invitations, etc. Facebook boasts that it is “giving people the power to share and make the world more open and connected” (About, 2011). For every Queen City Theatre Company production, a Facebook Event (an electronic invitation) is created and sent to everyone who is a fan of the company. This Facebook Event provides information about the production, the production dates, and all other pertinent information. What makes a Facebook Event a powerful tool for organizations like QCTC is that anyone who is invited can in turn invite their friends, thereby significantly increasing the number of invitations. However, because Facebook Events are such an easy tool to use, any given Facebook user could receive multiple invitations for a variety of events each day making it an annoyance to check all of the Facebook Events in his or her inbox and therefore reducing the impact of the invitations.

Wedolowski states that one year ago, Facebook was the best marketing tool Queen City Theatre Company had, but now he cannot rely on it as much. What has changed about the director’s use of Facebook is getting the patrons involved. QCTC asks the audience members to update Facebook statuses, mention the production they have just seen, and give a review of it. Wedolowski says Facebook has really impacted QCTC. When QCTC is mentioned in patrons’ Facebook updates it is an instantaneous way to reach people with whom Queen City Theatre Company is not directly connected.

Another strategy in social media marketing is Twitter. Twitter is a means of sharing personal and/or professional information between individuals and organizations. For organizations:

Twitter connects businesses to customers in real-time. Businesses use Twitter to quickly share information with people interested in their products and services,

gather real-time market intelligence and feedback, and build relationships with customers, partners and influential people. From brand lift, to CRM, to direct sales, Twitter offers businesses a chance to reach an engaged audience. (Twitter, 2011, para. 4)

Queen City Theatre Company does not use Twitter because Wedolowski says Twitter is losing its impact on a smaller scale and is being used more for its connection with celebrities.

From a business perspective, I don't think it's that effective unless you have a lot of promotions and discounts, and then maybe people will say "Okay, this is worth my time." I think it would be more effective at a community level than at a single organization level, but that requires a lot of coordination with other organizations that sometimes, in places like Charlotte, is difficult to achieve. (Wedolowski, personal communication, March 8, 2011)

It is important to note that social media is constantly evolving and arts administrators must be in tune with the current social media phenomenon if seeking to most effectively utilize social media as a form of communication.

News broadcast/radio. Queen City Theatre Company would like to utilize news broadcasting and radio more than it has previously. QCTC's directors and actors have been interviewed on the local public radio program, *Charlotte Talks with Mike Collins*, about their involvement with productions. QCTC's directors feel with radio they are able to reach a different audience than those who would be reached through social media and print advertisements. Additionally, QCTC's actors have been interviewed on Fox News, with the actors' interviews occasionally accompanied on air by rehearsal footage.

Word of mouth. Word of mouth is an important method of communicating with potential patrons for Queen City Theatre Company. Both directors mentioned the opening weekends of productions are a little slow, but by the final two weekends, shows sell well and some even sell out. To combat the often small crowds of opening night, the directors will offer discounted or complimentary tickets to loyal patrons who have expressed they are having financial troubles and are unable to attend the productions. Making sure the theatre is full on opening night means more people have seen the production and can recommend it to others. Additionally, by helping their loyal patrons in need, QCTC is strengthening relationships and encouraging long-term commitment from these patrons. Wedolowski always tells the audience how important it is to tell others about the work Queen City Theatre Company produces, but he is quick to point out the importance of a quality product to prevent this method from creating a negative impact.

Signage/posters. Queen City Theatre Company does not have any concrete evidence regarding the effectiveness of posters, but based on feedback from patrons, it does not believe posters are an effective method of audience development. However, because almost every theatre company in Charlotte uses posters, QCTC wants to be visually represented as well. The problem lies in getting the public to stop and read posters. What is even more problematic is the locations in Charlotte which allow theatres to hang posters usually have a particular location for all of the posters to reside – typically in the back of the establishment, near the restrooms, on a small and cluttered corkboard. This location makes it difficult to distinguish individual posters and even more difficult to focus on the different messages presented.

QCTC tends to hang posters in alternative businesses or areas of Charlotte considered arts friendly because these locations are more likely to allow posters to be hung. The directors keep a list of all of the locations which allow posters to be hung and then divide the responsibility of distributing posters to those locations amongst the cast and crew. While this method is thought to be somewhat ineffective, QCTC continues to utilize it because it is inexpensive and serves as just one more reminder of each production.

Lifestyle magazine. Queen City Theatre Company does not advertise in any lifestyle magazines due to cost. For example, *Charlotte Magazine* which focuses on “top dining, entertainment, shopping and real estate in the region,” is too expensive for QCTC and purchasing an advertisement in this magazine would skew the advertising budget (Charlotte Magazine, 2011, para. 1). However, *Charlotte Magazine* does support QCTC through its calendar of events and during the run of *Evita* they even featured the production with Queen City Theatre Company’s logo and a photo of the production.

Theatre’s direct mail. QCTC has opted not to use any form of direct mail to communicate with patrons because this method does not provide a significant return on investment. However, the company’s mailing address is made available to patrons for those who prefer to communicate in this manner.

What is Queen City Theatre Company’s Desired Response from the Methods Used?

Queen City Theatre Company’s goal with every production is to sell out each performance. The company understands not every production will appeal to the general public, and that sometimes makes selling out difficult. So, in addition to the goal of

selling out all performances, there is also the goal of informing the community of who QCTC is:

I really want the theatre company to have an image in the community regardless of the show we are doing so I really want people to go to our website. I want people to hear about QCTC even if we are not doing a show. So, when we are doing a show and we advertise, what I want is to bring people closer to QCTC. Even if the show is not appealing to them, maybe they can see something else that is coming up and they will join this community we are trying to build.

(Wedolowski, personal communication, March 8, 2011)

What Demographic Does Queen City Theatre Company Target for Their Audience Base?

Queen City Theatre Company's target demographic has evolved since its inception in 2007. Originally, QCTC targeted the Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender (LGBT) community and produced edgier productions that would appeal to a young LGBT person. Its mission has always been to challenge audiences by presenting works that thematically deal with the human experience. After the first season, Wedolowski realized QCTC needed to broaden its target demographic. Where he might have been targeting gay men between 25 and 45 years old, the audience was being filled by people between 16 and 65 years old, mostly middle class, but a wide variety in sexual orientations and races.

Queen City Theatre Company has noted the majority of its audience is comprised of younger adults in the 20s/30s range. The company recognizes it is categorized as a

“fringe” theatre and accepts that description since it does present new, edgy shows targeted at alternative demographics. QCTC’s mission is to present the human experience in its various forms, so it is not opposed to being categorized in such a way. Because the appeal for Queen City Theatre Company’s productions is so wide, it is currently trying not to focus on one particular demographic. The company must have an equally wide reach to inform the community of its productions.

What Mode of Ticketing is Used? If Online Ticketing Has Been Used, How Has This Helped with Marketing Queen City Theatre Company’s Productions?

Queen City Theatre Company has strict guidelines for its methods of ticket sales since it is housed by the Blumenthal Performing Arts Center. Patrons have three ways to purchase tickets: calling the Blumenthal Box Office, purchasing tickets at the box office, and going online through CarolinaTix.org. Again, according to Wedolowski, approximately 85% of Queen City Theatre Company’s patrons purchase tickets online. While a fair number of patrons still purchase tickets at the box office, box office sales have decreased since the company’s inception. Additionally, sales by phone have never been very high in the company’s history and continue to decrease each year.

The online ticket sales help QCTC to know its web presence is effective. Anywhere the shows are mentioned there is a link to purchase tickets, making ticket purchasing a simple task for any interested party. Additionally, because tickets are sold through CarolinaTix.org, QCTC receives free advertising. CarolinaTix.org promotes all events for which it sells tickets on the website and through emails. “It’s really good because you’re always on their website so people can flip through what’s going on. They

also send out email blasts of their own...and they go to a whole lot of people that we don't know" (Griffin, personal communication, March 18, 2011).

With the start of the fifth season, Queen City Theatre Company will begin to offer season tickets and discounted group tickets based on patron requests. Ticket packages will be sold through the current methods of ticket sales. Patrons who purchase season tickets will not only receive the tickets at a discounted price, but will also receive preferred seating.

Does Queen City Theatre Company Collaborate with Any Other Organizations to Promote Their Productions?

Queen City Theatre Company's directors believe in collaboration and often promote other theatres when talking to their audiences. For example, during curtain speeches Wedolowski will often inform audience members of other productions currently running at theatre companies in Charlotte. He expects other theatre companies to do this for him in return.

QCTC also collaborates with charities. Wedolowski says that audiences are keen to support organizations which help other organizations. QCTC collaborates with RAIN, the Regional Aids Interfaith Network, by donating proceeds from every opening night to the organization. In turn, RAIN promotes Queen City Theatre Company's shows through email to its supporters. For one production in QCTC's fourth season, *Southern Baptist Sissies*, it collaborated with the Trevor Project, an organization "determined to end suicide among LGBTQ youth by providing life-saving and life-affirming resources including nationwide, 24/7 crisis intervention lifeline, digital community and

advocacy/educational programs that create a safe, supportive and positive environment for everyone” (Trevor Project, 2010, para. 1). A portion of the ticket sales went to the Trevor Project. In return the Trevor Project promoted *Southern Baptist Sissies* through Facebook (reaching almost 120,000 people across America) and the production was nearly sold out for the entire run. For this same production, QCTC collaborated with another theatre in Charlotte producing a musical targeted towards the same demographic. Both companies represented each other in programs and promotions.

For the promotion the upcoming production of *Chess*, Queen City Theatre Company collaborated with Cirque du Soleil’s *Totem*. The directors contacted Cirque du Soleil and asked if it would be interested in collaborating in order to promote both productions. Cirque du Soleil agreed and gave QCTC 10 free tickets to raffle to any patrons who purchased tickets in advance for *Chess*. In exchange, QCTC promoted Cirque du Soleil’s *Totem* through emails, Facebook and its website. As a result, more than \$2,000 in advanced tickets were sold for QCTC’s *Chess*, a production that would not open for two more months. The advanced ticket sales for *Chess* were the second best in the company’s history; *Evita* from the previous season remains in first place.

Does Queen City Theatre Company Have Any Media Partnerships?

Queen City Theatre Company has a media partnership with *Charlotte Creative Loafing* and receives discounted advertisement space. QCTC attempted to begin a partnership with the *Charlotte Observer*, but found advertising with the newspaper too expensive for the current budget. QCTC invests money where it cannot reach people by word of mouth. The LGBT community members are regular patrons of Queen City

Theatre Company and while that demographic of the audience is certainly still growing, QCTC feels this particular community does a good job of telling each other about productions. Therefore, QCTC has chosen not to partner with *qnotes*.

qnotes is the LGBT arts, entertainment and news publication based in Charlotte, N.C. With a...free print circulation of approximately 10,000 distributed every other week, we are the largest and most trusted source of news, politics, opinion, entertainment, art, lifestyle, community events and more for LGBT North Carolinians and South Carolinians. (qnotes, 2010, para. 1)

With the *Charlotte Observer*, QCTC is able to reach more demographics through advertisements, but because it is so expensive, investment must be strategic by only advertising for specific shows with a broader appeal. QCTC chooses which newspaper to advertise in depending on the popularity of the production, the demographic the company is trying to reach, the cost of advertising in the newspaper, and the cost of the newspaper to the target demographic.

What has Queen City Theatre Company's Involvement Been with the Metrolina Theatre Association? Has This Involvement Helped Queen City Theatre Company's Audience Development?

The Metrolina Theatre Association is a non-profit organization whose mission statement says it "will advance member participation through technological innovation, will strengthen arts awareness in the community by creating new ways to engage the public, and be a strong advocate of the performing arts." (Metrolina Theatre Association, n.d.)

Queen City Theatre Company has been involved with the Metrolina Theatre Association (MTA) since 2007. While QCTC respects the mission and vision of the MTA, it is disappointed by the actual works and operations of the organization. The directors feel the MTA should be helping the Charlotte community at large become more familiar with the theatre community. Instead, the MTA has become an internal theatre community organization where the majority of the people being informed about the theatre community are members of that same community.

However, QCTC does believe the MTA helped it achieve a better position in the theatre community by giving many awards to QCTC's actors, actresses, and technical specialists. Recently the MTA also awarded QCTC the Theatre Company of the Year award. Griffin believes being able to promote the achievement of Theatre Company of the Year offers validation of the quality of the work produced to members of the community unfamiliar with Queen City Theatre Company's productions.

What is Queen City Theatre Company's Involvement with Grant Writing?

Queen City Theatre Company has never applied for a grant. The company was asked by the Arts and Science Council of Charlotte to apply for a grant two years ago, but after looking at where the company stood financially, the directors realized the company was self-sufficient. QCTC did not want to accept the grant when there were other companies who were more in need of the funding.

QCTC is cautiously considering whether to apply for grants in the future. Currently, the directors decide QCTC's programming. Organizations who supply the funding for grants are often particular about the programming their funds support. The

directors of QCTC do not want to be held accountable for their programming choices by any outside organization, especially considering they produce edgy theatre.

What is the Board's Involvement with Audience Development?

At this point, Queen City Theatre Company's board is limited in its involvement with the company. QCTC wants to remedy this lack of involvement in the upcoming year. In order to increase the audience size, the board must become more engaged in the organization. Most board members currently attend productions, but do not participate in audience development. In summer 2011, in preparation for the fifth season, QCTC wants to create a new and active board. Wedolowski wants to develop a board which will promote the image of the company and will help QCTC become more a part of the community. Griffin wants the board to be passionate about the work Queen City Theatre Company produces and help with fundraising and promotions. Both directors agree after four seasons, they have a better sense of their company goals and want the board to be involved in achieving those goals.

What is the Patron Involvement with Audience Development?

Queen City Theatre Company's patrons are an integral part of audience development. QCTC utilizes the ability to track the emails it sends – who receives them, who opens them, who forwards them, and who clicks on links in the email. If Wedolowski notices a particular patron forwarding emails, he will send a friend request to the patron on Facebook and will get to know the patron through Facebook. Since one of the main draws on Facebook is posting pictures of yourself, Wedolowski is able to find

out what the patron looks like so he will be able to visually identify the patron at the next production and will begin a face-to-face friendship with that individual. He will continue to encourage the patron to spread information about QCTC's productions.

Wedolowski also tracks how many people update Facebook statuses with information about QCTC's current production or about the company in general. If a person tends to post multiple updates about QCTC, then Wedolowski will post information about productions directly onto that person's Facebook page which exposes QCTC to all of that person's friends who may not be directly connected to the company.

Wedolowski believes it is important to have the audience feel involved in the company. In our interview, he told me the following story: During the last production, there was a night where two chairs were empty in the theatre. Wedolowski thanked the audience members for attending, but told them they did not do a very good job. When a few audience members asked what he meant, he replied they did not tell enough friends about the show because there were two empty seats in the theatre which should have been filled. As Wedolowski expected because of their close relationship, the audience members were not offended and knew that Wedolowski was not really scolding them. What Wedolowski did not expect were the many emails received afterwards from patrons explaining they *did* spread the word about the production. Patrons were apologizing for the empty seats; Wedolowski's tactic actually worked! The audience felt responsible for the two empty chairs. The audience members present the night of the two empty chairs will most likely tell even more friends about the next production to avoid another evening with empty seats.

Queen City Theatre Company's recent production, *Southern Baptist Sissies*, was a play dealing with a problem relevant to the LGBT community. The audiences were touched by the production and reached out to let QCTC know how much the production meant. Additionally, audience members began talking to each other through Facebook about the production – the kind of community involvement QCTC has been working towards:

Kristian really has such a good rapport with the audience that they really feel like they know him and that they are his friends and so they want to tell people about the show. After the show will often say again...if you enjoyed what you saw, please you're our best advertisement, tell your friends. And really, people have said, "Oh, So-and-so told me to come and see this and I loved it!" (Griffin, personal communication, March 18, 2011)

What Methods of Audience Development Have Been Most Effective for Queen City Theatre Company?

Facebook and word of mouth are the two most effective audience development methods for Queen City Theatre Company. However, one more effective tool is the company's transparency to the community. During the first season, QCTC had pre-recorded curtain speeches played before each production. The directors felt the stage belonged to the actors, so they did not want to bother the audience with long curtain speeches. However, they soon found out the pre-recordings did not work in terms of building an audience. Audience members wanted to know who QCTC was; they wanted to know what the people who were running the company looked like. During the period

of pre-recordings, QCTC did not receive many donations, did not see a lot of the same audience members returning to different productions, and in short, people were not connecting with the theatre.

The directors took this feedback and now use in-person curtain speeches to connect with the audience and to inform the audience of who the company is and what it does. Additionally, the directors use this time to ask for donations, make jokes, play games where the audience can win tickets to upcoming productions, and build a relationship with the audience. During intermission, the directors will have drinks with the audience and talk to as many audience members as possible. After the show they talk to the audience again and thank everyone for coming. The director's believe this has played a major role in audience development success for QCTC.

Additionally, QCTC has found positive results when it is able to place an advertisement in the *Charlotte Observer* because that particular newspaper has such a wide reach and the advertisements tend to stand out more. Likewise, when the company is able to run larger advertisements in *Creative Loafing* it sees an increase in audience attendance. For *Southern Baptist Sissies*, QCTC placed a full page advertisement in *Creative Loafing* for the first time and the production sold very well. Because this production was relevant to the LGBT community and because of the collaboration with the Trevor Project, the directors know the advertisement was not the only reason the production sold so well, but they are willing to try this method again. QCTC will look for trends between the ticket sales of this production and any others for which it utilizes a full page advertisement.

What Methods of Audience Development Have Been Least Effective for Queen City Theatre Company?

Posters and small printed advertisements are the least effective methods for audience development for Queen City Theatre Company. It still utilizes the poster method for reasons previously mentioned, but it does not spend a large portion of the audience development budget on this method.

In regards to printed advertisements, it is interesting that QCTC simultaneously states this method is both one of the most effective and least effective methods for audience development. Both directors explain they have noticed small advertisements become lost because publications, like *Creative Loafing*, are loaded with advertisements. Therefore, they either have to place a half-page or full-page advertisement to see any growth in audience numbers. After recent success with a full page advertisement, they are ready to continue to try this method for certain productions because they believe the return on investment will be worthwhile.

Does Queen City Theatre Company Have a Budget for Audience Development?

The budget for audience development has grown over time for Queen City Theatre Company. The more technically complex the productions have become and the more the company has grown overall, the more the budget has grown. Currently, the budget varies between \$1,500 and \$4,000 per show depending on the production. The total company budget for audience development averages to approximately \$12,000-\$14,000 annually.

Is Queen City Theatre Company Successful Overall in Terms of Audience Development? Why or Why Not?

Both directors agree they have successfully built an audience for Queen City Theatre Company based on their tracking of audience growth since the first season. They pepper each season with productions they know will bring in an audience, but they do not want to compromise the artistic integrity of the company by only producing familiar titles. Each show they choose fits the mission to explore the human experience. Where one show in the season may be a popular title, another show in the season may be unheard of by the Charlotte public. They want to ensure that, regardless of the popularity of the production, the audience is challenged.

Prior to QCTC's first production, *Sordid Lives*, the directors were informed they would be lucky if 30 audience members attended each night based on the level of audience attendance for past productions of other theatre companies performed in the Duke Energy Theatre. QCTC was new, it did not have an audience base, and being told they would be lucky to have only 30 audience members scared the directors. However, *Sordid Lives* saw well more than 30 audience members per night. In fact, several nights of the production's run were sold out. QCTC felt accomplished and was more confident when the second show, *Manuscript*, opened.

The second production provided a very different experience. A total of 227 people saw *Manuscript*, which is the equivalent of 1.5 full houses in the Duke Energy Theatre. However, after the second production, audience sizes grew exponentially. QCTC has tracked the size of the audience for every production since *Manuscript* to be able to see a true margin of growth.

In five years, we've grown more than I thought we really would. Our show *Evita* sold out way before we even opened and for a new theatre company...and for no one knowing what the end product was going to be, it's incredible. The show that we are doing now, *Chess*, which is not as well-known...people are already buying their tickets way in advance. (Griffin, personal communication, March 18, 2011)

Is There Anything Queen City Theatre Company Would Like to Change About Their Audience Development Methods?

Wedolowski wants to make several changes, but he needs the company to earn more money in order for the changes to come to fruition. Additionally, he wants to organize promotional performances in public locations – songs from upcoming musicals being performed in open spaces, signs or flags promoting the company and its shows downtown – a variety of concepts aimed at educating the public about the company and its productions.

As we build the audience, we will grow. As you grow in audiences, you grow financially. When you grow financially, you can really spend more money on development and keep growing your audience. So you grow as an organization and I really think if you are doing the right thing then you are always moving up. (Wedolowski, personal communication, March 8, 2011)

Griffin would like to hear feedback from the audience about what shows Queen City Theatre Company should produce:

I would like to try to get the audience a little bit more involved. I try to be very selective and try to bring in those shows that audiences want to see. I would like

to know what they want to see and what is on their minds of what we are doing – what they've enjoyed of our seasons, what they haven't enjoyed. So I really think in this upcoming year I would like to do something where we survey the audience. (Griffin, personal communication, March 18, 2011)

Does Queen City Theatre Company Participate in any Revenue-Generating Practices Outside of Ticket Sales?

Queen City Theatre Company is a non-profit 501(c)(3) organization. Outside of ticket sales, the only other revenue it receives is through donations. Griffin says the company does not receive a large amount of money through donations, but receives enough to supplement the expenses outside of the money generated through ticket sales.

QCTC has considered selling advertisement space in its programs or on the website, but the directors chose partnerships instead. The company advertises for organizations for free on the website or in programs and asks the organizations it partners with to do the same.

QCTC once sold t-shirts for the production of *Altar Boyz*, but the decision was not profitable. In the end, the company barely broke even and since has not tried to sell merchandise for any other production.

Between the fourth and fifth seasons, the company will host a summer program for students, but the program will not reap a profit. The money required for students to participate will pay for materials, educators, rehearsal space, and production expenses for the summer camp. While the summer program will not generate short-term revenue, Queen City Theatre Company expects it will generate long-term revenue by reaching new

actors and new audience members and by strengthening the company's presence in the community.

What are Queen City Theatre Company's Audience Development Goals for the Next Year? The Next Five Years?

Queen City Theatre Company's goal for the next year is to continue to gain momentum in audience growth. The company grew quickly during the first two years of operation, but during the third season, QCTC began to feel the impact of the economic crisis in Charlotte. While the audience still grew during the time of crisis, it did not grow as quickly as in the first two seasons.

For the upcoming season, QCTC wants to survey its audience. The directors already talk to patrons during and after shows, but they want concrete feedback. They also want to increase collaboration with other theatre companies. Griffin says:

I would also like to partner more with other theatre companies. All the theatre companies in Charlotte are fairly diverse that none of us really are in competition with each other. So, I think that the more that we can talk about what's going on in other theatres, the more audiences will want to see other things. I know it's so cliché, but there's nothing like live theatre. If you give audiences live theatre, they might want more and more. (Griffin, personal communication, March 18, 2011)

Looking beyond just the next year, QCTC has more specific audience development goals:

My goal for the season that begins in 2012-2013 will be to be able to sell in advance the whole run of a show. I think it's a very, very ambitious goal, but I think if not that, then at least what is considered in Charlotte a standard run. For all the performances that we do, because of the great amount of audiences that are coming, we are the only theatre company that performs a show with only one dark day during the week. We risk not having people, but every single night we have good attendance. (Wedolowski, personal communication, March 8, 2011)

For Wedolowski, a "standard run" refers to performance dates Thursday through Saturday with or without a Sunday matinee. Queen City Theatre Company performs in the evenings Tuesday through Saturday as well as a Sunday matinee.

After meeting this goal, QCTC wants to move into a larger venue such as the McGlohon Theatre, located in Spirit Square or the Booth Playhouse – both of which are under the Blumenthal Performing Arts Center umbrella – and it wants to extend the run of its productions. Now, each production runs for three weeks, but the goal is to expand to five or six weeks within five years.

Chapter 3

Comparison of Literature and Methods Employed by Queen City Theatre Company

As previously stated in Chapter 1, I learned through my research of audience development the most common means of audience development are communication – through word of mouth, building relationships with patrons, phone, mailings, emails, social media – and advertising. Based on my interviews with the directors of Queen City Theatre Company, I found many common threads between the literature on audience development and the methods QCTC utilizes to build its audience. It is necessary to point out this research is specifically narrowing in on audience development for emerging theatre companies. What can be gleaned from the literature as well as the interviews to support emerging theatre companies in their quest for audience development?

As stated in Chapter 2, QCTC utilizes a variety of methods to inform the community of productions, thereby growing the audience. Effective methods include: newspapers, email, social media, news broadcasts and radio programs, and word of mouth. Less effective/ineffective methods include: posters, lifestyle magazines, and direct mail.

Specifically examining social media, a relatively new method for connecting with potential audiences, Wedolowski spoke of the ways social media has helped QCTC gain success in audience development – both by allowing the company to directly connect with community members and inform them of its productions, but also by allowing the audience to connect with community members to spread the word about QCTC. However, Wedolowski also mentioned he cannot rely on social media sites like Facebook to reap the same benefits as they did even a year ago because social media sites are

becoming too saturated to allow groups and individuals to have the same impact they once did.

“Technology isn’t a universal solution for attracting audiences. The latest online services are creating new, more interactive and participatory forms of engagement and altering the traditional relationships between arts presenters and their audiences” (Szanto, 2008, p. 15). Queen City Theatre Company is right to not rely solely on social media in order to develop its audience. However, while this method (like all others) cannot be an organization’s sole method of audience development, it is an excellent tool for building relationships and QCTC is right on target. Audience members, as well as potential audience members, can get to know the company on-line through pictures of productions, feedback from other audience members, and as a direct link to communicate with the company’s directors. Additionally, audience members are able to interact with each other regarding a particular production and can therefore enrich their experience by taking it beyond a source of entertainment.

Both directors mentioned the wide variety of people who attend their productions. They have a diverse audience which at first was a surprise for them since they originally targeted the LGBT community. Currently, QCTC does not have a target demographic, which I believe can be good or bad. While QCTC has a wide variety of demographics represented in the audience, how many of those demographics are represented in small numbers? QCTC has an opportunity to develop the lesser represented demographics and further diversify and grow its audience.

QCTC's use of online ticketing has provided it with additional, free advertising through CarolinaTix.Com. Additionally, online ticketing has provided the company's patrons with an easy means of purchasing tickets.

Americans are pushing ticket purchases back until the last minute. They want flexibility. Online services allow arts groups to be more targeted and effective as they move away from a world of 'by appointment' subscription-based attendance, to one where spur-of-the-moment decisions are the norm (Szanto, 2008, p. 15).

Outside of ticket sales and donations, Queen City Theatre Company does not have any other revenue generating methods. Grant writing could certainly provide the company with additional funding, but as the directors stated during the interviews, they do not want to be accountable for their programming to outside organizations. Grant writing can be a very beneficial tool, but emerging theatre companies do need to be aware the outside organizations which provide funding may have a say in the emerging theatre company's programming.

If QCTC would like to increase donations, it needs to recognize where the donations are coming from and what the motivations are behind the donations so the directors can build relationships with more likeminded individuals. "The most frequent attendees are...more likely to make monetary donations to cultural institutions. The clear message to arts organizations seeking to raise more money is that fundraising efforts should be linked to engaging audiences" (Ostrower, 2005, p. 5).

Audience Development Strategies for Emerging Theatre Companies

Based upon my research and interviews with Queen City Theatre Company's directors, I recommend the following strategies for emerging theatre companies in Charlotte, North Carolina to successfully develop an audience during their formative years.

Take risks. It is important for emerging theatre companies to take risks when promoting productions. Did Queen City Theatre Company think Cirque du Soleil would really be willing to collaborate with a small, non-profit theatre in Charlotte, North Carolina? No, but that did not stop the directors from asking. Emerging theatre companies should contact their local radio stations and news stations to ask if they can promote productions. Additionally, "arts organizations seeking to further engage frequent attendees might consider ways to reach out to clubs, coffee houses, and restaurants when advertising or, where feasible, by trying to present their own work in such venues" (Ostrower, 2005, p. 11). Emerging theatre companies should contact local bars, clubs, and cafés to promote productions through small-scale performances that give the public a taste of what their company has to offer. The idea is to think creatively and not to be afraid of rejection.

Invest. Emerging theatre companies must understand they have to invest money and time into audience development in addition to their productions. Spending the entire beginning budget (which really may not be much) on the production aspects will not guarantee an audience. Some amount of investment must be made for audience development, but it must be a wise investment. Spending your entire budget on posters is not going to give companies a high return on investment. If an emerging theatre

company has absolutely no money, then it needs to make sure it is investing time into other methods of audience development.

Investigate. Where can you advertise for free? Who will give you advertising discounts? Where can you promote your productions? What are other theatres doing to promote themselves?

Social media. Become familiar with social media sites and use them to communicate with potential audience members in the way they like to communicate. Remember people can become inundated with information on social media sites, so you do not want to promote your organization so much that you become an annoyance. Use social media as a way to inform and connect with audience members and potential audience members. Find other like-minded organizations and connect with their friends and followers on social media sites.

Collaborate. Approach similar organizations and ask them to collaborate with you. If your theatre company does not have a permanent residence, maybe you can use another theatre's space in return for the promotion of their company to your email list. Offer to promote other shows in your program and on your website in exchange for the same deal with another theatre company. Collaborate with charitable organizations for the promotion of both organizations.

Document. Document your audience development methods and track the results to find out what works and what does not work so you can tailor an approach to audience development each season. Document the number of audience members for each production so you can track the growth of your theatre company and you can look for trends in low or high attendance.

Experience. Think about the experience your audience members will have when they choose to attend a performance at your theatre company.

Consumers are attracted to some events and repelled by others based on how they found out about the performance, how easy it was to purchase tickets, how easy it is to find a parking spot, the ability to have a meal or drink in conjunction with the performance, the courtesy of facility employees, the ease with which seats were found, and so on. (Webb, 2004, p. 55)

What is the total experience your audience members are receiving? Production quality matters and for some audience members it will be the most important factor in whether or not they return to your theatre, but these non-production factors will weigh heavily for many audience members. This is not to say you need to serve a five-course meal before your production and offer valet parking, but you have to think proactively to prevent frustrations for your audience members.

For example, if your theatre does not have its own parking, make sure audience members are informed about where they can park when attending your productions. Team up with neighboring businesses to ask if your patrons can use their parking lot in return for free promotion of those businesses in your program and on your website.

Build Relationships. Let your audience members know who you are and get to know them. Interact with your audience at every opportunity and always show them you appreciate that they support your art. Let audience members know how important they are to the longevity of your organization and without them you cannot thrive.

When it comes to connecting to new audiences, the strategies of the most successful arts organizations involve a willingness to embrace transparency and risk.

Transparency has to do with the openness and candor of how arts groups speak to their audience. (Szanto, 2008, p.21)

Conclusions

Queen City Theatre Company is an example for all emerging theatre companies in Charlotte, North Carolina of what can be accomplished in just four years. Because QCTC has successfully developed an audience, it is debt-free and is able to focus all income on upcoming productions and furthering audience development which will help the company grow.

I think any emerging theatre company that has a willingness to work just as hard on audience development as it works on its artistic development, can find success. I also think my eight audience development strategies for emerging theatre companies can help an emerging theatre begin the overwhelming task of finding and connecting to an audience. However, the task of audience development is never ending and should not be abandoned once a theatre company feels comfortable with the number of audience members in attendance for its productions.

After completing this research, I am surprised to find that Queen City Theatre Company uses many methods similar to those discussed in the literature. This leads me to think that audience development for emerging theatre companies is not very different than audience development for established theatre companies. Were I to continue this research, I would look deeper into the evolution of audience development tactics when a theatre company transitions from an emerging theatre company into an established theatre company. The general methods are the same, but what adjustments do emerging

theatre companies need to make to their strategies once they survive their formative years?

When I am able to open and manage my own theatre company, I will refer to the methods used by Queen City Theatre Company as well as the strategies I provided for emerging theatre companies. I will begin by seeking a target audience, but will then spread to other demographics. I will use my budget wisely when advertising for productions. I will rely heavily on word of mouth and developing relationships with audience members to encourage patron loyalty to my company. I believe that by following these strategies, I will achieve my ultimate goal of managing a theatre company which enriches the community it serves.

Appendix

Glossary

Emerging theatre company: A non-professional theatre company that has been producing for five years or less.

Established theatre company: A professional or non-professional theatre company that has been producing for more than five years.

House: Seating area for audience members.

Production: Play or musical

Professional theatre company: A theatre company which pays its actors, designers, crew, directors and staff. Additionally, professional theatres follow Actor's Equity guidelines.

Run: the starting date to end date that a play or musical are being performed. For example, August 1st through August 21st.

Sell out: Every seat in the audience is sold.

Standard run: Performances Thursday through Saturday night with or without a Sunday matinee.

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