

# The Sensoryscape of Theaters: A Case of Two University Associated Theaters

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## Abstract

Live theater productions, must compete with other forms of entertainment offered in the experience economy (Barlow and Maul 2000). An impressive sensory experience that entertains and excites consumers is a key element that can differentiate and distinguish one experience from another (Gobe 2001). To be competitive theater productions should use their delivery facilities to provide an immersion experience in a theater's sensoryscape.

Theater venues offer a sensory experience that contributes to the service offering and also provide an opportunity to contribute to the achievement of numerous marketing goals. By consciously developing the sensoryscape, not only will consumer enjoyment and satisfaction be increased but plans to return and positive word-of-mouth should result. Goals to increase group-supportive behavior (necessary for not-for-profit and cultural organizations) and attendance will be enhanced.

Successful services marketing involves provoking a positive emotional attachment from the consumer. By deliberately engaging synergistically the five senses of the audience a theater production can produce a stronger emotional connection with its audience members. In the entertainment sector, all five senses are relevant. By applying a multisensory appeal the quality and value of the theater experience (Kennedy 2008) and overall consumer satisfaction (Brakus, Schmitt, and Zarantonello 2009) will increase. Consumers with the desire to stimulate all of the senses are more willing to overcome the costs of travel time and other expenditures to obtain this experience (Lee, Lee, Seo and Green 2012).

Sensory experiences are an important part of the overall brand experience for any product or service (Gentile, Spiller and Noci 2007). In fact, when individuals engage multiple senses with the stimuli retention increases and perceived value of the stimuli increases (Lindstrom 2005). Multi-sensory experiences create a vivid impression in the consumer's mind and one sense can be affected by its relations with the other senses (Hulten 2011) to maximize the potential of the sensory experience.

Fine arts marketers can learn much from the research done by sports marketers. Findings show that sports consumers' positive affective experience with an event is

often grounded in their sensory experience at the stadium (Brakus, Schmitt and Zarantonello 2009). Research involving sports stadiums has found that a more memorable experience is produced when appealing to all five senses of the spectator (Lee, Heere and Chung 2013). Spectators apprehend, consciously or unconsciously, the visual attractiveness of a stadium's architecture, hear music, enjoy the proximity of other fans smell the foods and grass scents and savor the taste of the concessions.

As in the professional sports industry where the stadium is considered an important venue in which the sport consumer directly consumes and experiences the sport the theater is the venue in which the artistic production is consumed and experienced. Additionally, sports events and fine arts events compete against the ability to watch the same or similar events on television or in movie theaters. It needs to be communicated to audiences that the live experience represents a sensual experience that cannot be reproduced (Lee, Lee, Seo and Green 2012).

Therefore, the marketing task becomes to present the most effective combination of sensorial stimuli to trigger the designed emotional responses (Hinestroza and James 2014). Multi-sensory marketing looks to create positive, holistic experiences with the customer. It should also be noted that sensory features may also produce negative behavioral outcomes, especially if perceived as incongruent with other sensory features (Ballouli and Bennett 2014). Thus, the multi-sensory approach influences the consumer's experience as a total experience (Lindstrom 2005) or total immersion into the theater experience.

To advance the value of multi-sensory marketing for theaters two different theaters were analyzed based on their sensory experiences for the theater attendee. The theaters are both administered by the University of Southern Indiana.

The Performance Center is a new facility located in the center of campus. Labeled as 'state-of-the-art' this performance center contains 300 seats, each with an outstanding view. The thrust stage and additional staging areas are enhanced by exceptional natural acoustics and state-of-the-art light and sound technology. The performers (employees) experience spacious dressing and green rooms and the stages are designed in a lab with sophisticated computer equipment and software.

Murphy Auditorium is located in a historic town, New Harmony, approximately 15 miles from the university. This theater was built in 1914 and maintains its historic charm. While the mission of the theater includes the provision of educational opportunities for students, guest actors from Actors' Equity Association also perform. The auditorium seats 360 people in what can be described as a traditional seating arrangement. The location, external appearance and stage for Murphy

Auditorium are all reminiscent of a theater experience before television and other modern forms of entertainment.

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**Relevance to Marketing Educators, Researchers and Practitioners:** This research explores relevant strategies to market live theater productions.

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