



Theatre with a Cause

Associating with an organization that furthers the mission of your theatre can lead to fruitful partnerships and build consciousness of a cause

By Anne Jackson

Cause-related marketing was all the rage in the 80s and 90s and used by corporations to support the causes their customers cared about. It has long morphed into other nomenclatures including purpose marketing, social change marketing, cause branding and yes, sponsorships.

We in theatre know a little bit about sponsorships. From garnering support for educational outreach programs to raising money for seats in our theatre, show business has always looked for ways to supplement their operating budgets. And in tough times, theatres are looking for alternative ways to seek contributions.

Richard Earle, senior associate with the Regis Group in Leesburg, Va. and author of the book, 'The Art of Cause Marketing,' defines traditional cause-related marketing as, 'A partnership between a cause organization which is under-funded, but which is supporting a program that benefits their community, and a wealthy corporation which funds a marketing campaign in support of that cause. Usually they also contribute their marketing expertise or that of their ad agency and media buyers to produce and place advertising in support of the cause.'

But in this economic environment, will corporations still support the cause?

In an Ad Age Magazine survey late last year, pessimistic marketers no longer listed cause-related marketing as a leading priority. Perhaps weary of the worsening economic news, many marketers viewed the marketing strategy as a luxury.

However in a subsequent Ad Age article, some of the world's leading marketers seemed to contradict that trend and reemphasized the importance of maintaining cause programs

as part of their marketing mix. The former Global Marketing Officer of Proctor & Gamble, Jim Stengel, who now owns his own consulting company and marketing think tank, feels that 'purpose branding is more important than ever.'

The benefits

On the surface, the advantages of partnering with a cause organization are clear. Earle explains, 'The benefit to the cause organization is obvious; they gain wide visibility for their programs that they could not otherwise afford. The benefit to the corporation is to create good-will among their customer base.'

Seema Sueko, co-founder and artistic director of San Diego's Mo'olelo Performing Arts Company works the fundamentals of cause marketing from both sides being one company's 'cause' and the other, supporting meaningful organizations like the San Diego Brain Injury Foundation (SDBIF), National Aphasia Association (NAA) and Sharp Healthcare Rehabilitation Services/ ThinkFirst program.

Mo'olelo fit the ticket perfectly for a socially-responsible investment firm called Blue Summit Financial Group since both organizations missions were aligned. 'Their Vice President heard me speak at a San Diego Net Impact mixer and contacted us about developing a relationship between Mo'olelo and Blue Summit,' explains Sueko. 'Blue Summit has made a commitment to purchasing a block of tickets to each of our productions and promoting Mo'olelo in their marketing materials, thus spreading the word about Mo'olelo to their clients.

In producing the play 'Night Sky,' the story of Anna, who after a car accident becomes aphasic, Mo'olelo was able to form strong alliances that truly rewarded Mo'olelo with new audiences, donations and a greater sense of purpose. The first relationship Mo'olelo formed was locally with the San Diego Brain Injury Foundation (SDBIF) to develop an arts education program to raise awareness about aphasia and other brain injuries. SDBIF was also able to provide dramaturgical support and developed a spread-the-word campaign.

In addition, Sueko says, 'We promoted SDBIF to new audiences through our marketing of the show. Mo'olelo and SDBIF found a shared individual donor who bought 200 tickets to the show for SDBIF to give away to brain injury survivors and their care givers.'

Mo'olelo also saw an increase in support in the form of contributions. 'An unexpected outcome was that one of the SDBIF board members donated \$10,000 to the production, and a related foundation, Survivors Rehabilitation Foundation, donated another \$10,000 to the production,' explains Sueko.

Mo'olelo also formed a national cross-promotion relationship with the National Aphasia Association (NAA) in which Mo'olelo promoted the NAA and their services locally through their playbill and other marketing materials and the NAA gave Mo'olelo a national platform to promote their play to the NAA constituents.

Sueko boils down the benefits to Mo'olelo as multi-faceted in that they are financial, but there are also intangible benefits too. 'New audiences generated new donors, and new partnerships generated new grant opportunities,' says Sueko. 'We're completely

transparent with these partnerships. Our overall goal is inclusion in the arts for all people.'

Sueko found the grassroots, 'spread-the-word' committees particularly in audience development to be successful. "Night Sky" achieved 95% capacity in September 2008, a month when many of our peer companies were experiencing lower ticket sales due to the economy,' explains Sueko. 'Each of these partnerships introduces Mo'olelo to a new audience. While some may only attend that one production, we're seeing that many of them stick around and come to all of our shows.'

The Facts

There have been studies upon studies proving the virtue of cause-related marketing and the positive impact it has on the companies that support causes. From Target and Proctor & Gamble to Johnson & Johnson and Celestial Seasonings, companies have been resistant to decreasing their support of social causes that reflect positively on their corporation.

'It is well-documented that many upscale consumers will pay more for a product or service that comes from a company that supports a cause or an organization they believe in,' says Earle. 'That's good for business, and that benefit should be stressed by any theatre approaching a corporate partner. A secondary corporate benefit is improved employee morale. Employees may feel good about working for a company they perceive to be a good corporate citizen, although that may be less significant in these trying economic times.'

Many consumers view a company favorably if they are willing to go out of their way to fight illiteracy, save the planet or support the arts. A study conducted by several university researchers who attempted to quantify the economic benefit of corporate giving found an incredible return on investment. The results reported in a 2007 article that appeared in 'The Chronicle of Philanthropy,' stated that for every new dollar a retail company, bank or popular goods manufacturer allocates to its charitable-giving budget, it can expect sales to grow an average of \$6.00.

And how will adding cause marketing impact the current sponsorships already in place? 'The question of cannibalizing traditional show or season sponsorships is unique to theatres and other arts organizations who rely upon corporate sponsorships for individual performances,' notes Earle. 'My suggestion for theatres would be to maintain a clear separation between those 'event' or 'performance' corporate sponsorships, and the educational programs that most theatres today have created and run. In-school programs, free performances of Shakespeare or other classics in an underserved community, even an on-site youth theatre training program, seem ideally suited for a theatre's cause-related partnership.'

Where do theatres fit in?

Sueko recommends that theatres look for partners that fit their missions. 'For Mo'olelo, it's all about selecting scripts that can serve underrepresented communities because that's a core part of our mission. Then, through grassroots outreach with these communities, we develop mutually-beneficial partnerships. Each partnership is unique.'

Earle, an ad agency veteran and a founding producer and artistic director of a large summer music theatre in suburban Boston, recommends creating cause-related sponsorships of educational programs and generating fundraising appeals to reach individual donors. 'It can create awareness and foster a climate of good will within the community, many of whose members may now be more inclined to become season subscribers or patrons,' suggests Earle. 'Finally, programs like in-school lectures or free community performances have the benefit of building future audiences who might otherwise never be exposed to live theatre, and who can clearly create future revenue.'

Earle also recommends developing wide-scale programs that could clearly be made available to multiple corporate partners. 'A theatre also has the added ability to produce glamorous and visible incentive packages for the staff and employees of corporate partners, such as opening night galas, meet-the-cast events, and blocks of complimentary tickets on sparsely attended nights,' explains Earle.

Getting started the right way

In your haste to forge relationships with corporations, be aware of what you bring to the table and do not undervalue it. 'A theatre may be well-branded, with an effective identity package,' says Earle. 'These should be vigorously protected in all dealings with your corporate partners' marketers. You must have the last word on all marketing efforts on your behalf, and this must clearly be understood up front.'

And don't enter into any relationships that could stagnate or reverse all of the goodwill you already have associated with your theatre brand. Earle advises theatres to be certain that the potential corporate partners you approach are sincerely committed to your cause, not just using you to burnish their tarnished image. 'Philip Morris, once characterized by 'Business Week' as 'the most reviled corporation in America' threw a lot of money at a number of non-profits, many of them in the performing arts category, and then rose to number 2 on a list of 'companies that come to mind as supporters of good causes' in a recent Roper Poll,' says Earle. 'But the arts organizations they funded felt used, particularly when their prestigious boards were prodded to use their influence with city government to derail onerous no-smoking regulations.'

Earle recommends avoiding cynical 'halo-burnishing' by your corporate partner by researching prospects to find any whose key executives or Board members, who may be subscribers or donors to your theatre, or whose children or grandchildren may be students in one of your theatre's youth programs. Says Earle, 'They are more likely to partner out of a sincere commitment to your institution.'

And remember to stay true to your cause. Sueko says 'For us, it's not so much about a 'cause' but a community—reaching a community that isn't traditionally included in mainstream theatre and inviting them to participate. It's about building new audiences by reflecting their stories on stage.'

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