

The Marketing Of Culture

by Martha Hostetter
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In the past few months, New York City Ballet's new workout video made the number-one spot on Amazon.com, and they have followed it up with a second "Ballerina Barbie" movie. While such deals are sure to draw sighs from dance aficionados, they may also be the new reality. Public funding for ballet and other cultural activities has dropped off, and many nonprofits can no longer afford to hold themselves aloof from the marketplace.

Cultural groups now have to work extra hard to keep audiences coming back. Subscriptions to dance or theater seasons and memberships to museums have not returned to pre-9/11 numbers, and many speculate that they never will. Whether audiences are too busy or too broke, they are no longer making long-term commitments to the arts. This means that cultural groups need to work harder to make a lasting impression -- to be sure that, if people enjoy one event, they will come back for more.

"Nonprofits are very open to change now," says D. K. Holland, a communications consultant that works with nonprofits, primarily on developing brand strategy. "Because of the funding situation, and the increased competition for time and attention, leaders of nonprofits are starting to realize that branding is extremely important."

Many arts groups are taking various steps to establish their "niche," and market their "product."

Promoting The Brand

Over the past decade, the lines between for-profit and nonprofit sectors have been blurring. Museums, theaters, and art galleries have increasingly turned to money-making enterprises, such as retail stores, cafés, and rentals.

Many nonprofits have become entrepreneurial in their approach to corporate sponsorship as well. With businesses becoming choosier about what they fund, arts groups are offering tailored opportunities for corporations to reach coveted markets: the young and hip, the well-heeled and leisure-minded.

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General Motors' recent donation of \$10 million to the "America on the Move" exhibit at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History, the largest single donation ever made to a cultural group, won the car company naming rights, and a prominent place in all promotions. But while museum curators insist that the car company has had no influence on content, there have been accusations that the exhibit is a commercial for GM. The Guggenheim's Armani exhibit drew similar criticism.

Clarifying the Message

In the marketplace, the worst thing to do is to imply that your product is a generic, and thus replaceable, commodity.

Branding helps to distinguish one product from another, and is just as important if you're marketing shampoo, a political candidate, or the latest opera. Amid the many different entertainment options, arts groups are struggling to communicate who they are, and what they are offering.

The New York Times reported last month that the one-year-old Museum of Sex has had trouble attracting visitors even though its subject should, theoretically, sell itself. But most of the press coverage has been superficial because the museum has failed to communicate its mission-- to present the history, evolution, and cultural significance of human sexuality through exhibits on prostitution, erotica, burlesque, sexual freedom, and other topics.

Importance of Design

With higher standards of design permeating every aspect of culture (toasters, cars, even La-Z-Boy recliners), arts groups are producing higher-quality publicity and marketing materials. Many graphic designers work pro bono or at reduced rates for cultural groups.

That image is important is clear at place like the Brooklyn Academy of Music, which was

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branded under Harvey Lichtenstein as BAM. With the rechristening of the institution, the venerable institution set aside the baggage of the past (and confusion over its mission). BAM's simple, graphical logo and typeface; color-washed photography; trademarking (the Next Wave Festival; BAMcafe; BAMcinatek; even the BAMbus); and sleek website create a coherent sense of the organization's modern, forward-looking ambition. BAM adds "value" to its brand by offering seminars, discussions, and special events that deepen its audiences' ties to the organization.

Niche Marketing

With the graying of audiences for culture, producers have been working to cultivate the next generation of patrons. Like niche marketers, many producers seek out "early adopters" individuals who are already tuned in to their work, or willing to take risks and rely on them to spread the word.

Gen Art, an organization that showcases the work of up-and-coming filmmakers, fashion designers, DJs, and visual artists, has built a business out of niche marketing. The company was founded 10 years ago by two young people who noticed that their artist-friends were having trouble getting noticed by their peers. By cultivating contacts with friends and acquaintances, Gen Art has built a list of more than 100,000 people who want to hear about cultural events in their cities, New York, Los Angeles, Miami, San Francisco, and Chicago. Corporations sponsor screenings, gallery openings, and music events for the privilege of tapping into this young, hip demographic.

"You have to know where you are in your life cycle," Gen Art president, Adam Walden, says of this kind of niche marketing. "We started in the early '90s by putting up signs for events in SoHo and Chelsea. Putting up posters wouldn't make sense for us now; we're focusing on getting to the press and promoting what we do to the right people. We want to grow organically, and keep the core audience happy."

Limits of Branding

In theory, effective branding can help arts groups to communicate with audiences and generate sustainable sources of financial support. But going too far with corporate-style

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marketing risks backlash. Many people are drawn to culture because it seems to be at least one degree removed from the marketplace. Those who consider themselves outside a demographic box will be turned off by too-blunt tactics. Corporate partnerships such as the one between the Smithsonian and GM will be scrutinized closely by public and private funders as well as audiences. And, in the current financial climate, arts groups will continue to look for that elusive balance between the commercial and the creative sides of art.

Martha Hostetter has written about the arts for the Village Voice, American Theater and Empire New York.