

STAGING CLEVELAND

STORIES FROM THE FIELD

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**Everyone Wins When
You Know Your Audience**

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PREPARE FOR A SHIFT

As an expert in arts and culture marketing, John Elliot looks at theater in Cleveland or any city with a global and generational perspective. For a number of years, the head of Elliot Marketing Group in Pittsburgh oversaw a collaborative marketing database among Cleveland area arts organizations. Today, he continues to conduct research on the Cleveland market area as well as in other cities nationally.

Considering the current scene in most cities, Elliot cautions that theaters need to bolster efforts to attract the millennial generation as first-time buyers, as well as reach out to Gen-Xers as first-time buyers, since they are the smaller generation, but are approaching the prime age range for increasing their arts activities.

Elliot also advises that all theaters need to prepare for an imminent population shift in 2026. That's when the oldest baby boomers will turn 80, a line of demarcation at which people begin to decrease their attendance at arts events because of mobility and comfort concerns.

"If people in the theater and arts world don't begin to address many of these issues in their targeting, there may be significant problems starting in about ten years and last for about ten years," he predicts.

PERCEIVED BARRIERS ARE ASSETS

The Cleveland Play House, which recently capped its 100th anniversary by accepting the 2015 Regional Theatre Tony Award, goes out of its way to engage its audiences at all levels. In 2016, for example, American's oldest regional theater reached 11,000 people with its suite of Inside CPH audience engagement programs.

"The surrounding idea with our different programs is that audience members, no matter where they are coming from, what their backgrounds are or what their education is, simply by being human have everything they need to experience and love theater," says Pamela DiPasquale, CPH's director of education.

The slate of activities ranges from pre-show conversations intended to illuminate and discuss themes of the play they are about to see that includes artists involved in the production, to post-show discussions where audience members can carry on the conversation and ask questions about the show. Events that are part of the Behind the Scenes program enable audience members to spend two hours with different theater artists to get to know them better and learn details of the creative efforts that went into the show.

CPH deftly uses its lobby to provide a variety of interactive events and sometimes theater games and even occasional scavenger hunts for children and families. There's also a variety of iPad experiences available, DiPasquale says, so that people can self curate through the dramaturgical materials to better comprehend the production or dive deeper into a specific aspect of the show.

Audience members also have occasional opportunities to attend a technical rehearsal of a play to see how it all comes together and talk with the actors, designers and crew. Additionally, CPH College gives

high school students and educators an opportunity to engage in master classes, Behind the Scenes events, as well as receive free tickets to performances.

“We make all of these events free so that we eliminate as many barriers as possible to people participating, with the goal of helping our audiences understand the art form,” DiPasquale says. “We know that whatever people may see as barriers to their participating in theater are actually assets that they bring with them when they enter the theater.”

A recent study by CPAC confirms that Cleveland is well-positioned amongst other American cities of similar size, geography, income, and demographics when it comes to theater attendance rates. “Data from market research firm SDRS revealed that roughly 580,000 individuals that lived in the Cleveland Designated Market Area attended a live theater even in 2013,” the report says. “This equates to 37 out of 100 households viewing live theater that year.... That ranks Northeast Ohio slightly above Pittsburgh, PA and Buffalo, NY, which claim between 35 and 36 per 100 households, respectively.”

EXPERIENCE ENHANCEMENTS

When it comes to their audiences, Great Lakes Theater continues to follow the path initiated by its grassroots founders back in 1962. “We remain committed to the mission they set forth, which was to bring the pleasure, power and relevance of classic theater to the widest possible audience,” says Todd Krispinsky, director of institutional advancement.

GLT does so through a spectrum of programs and practices, starting with providing affordable ticket prices. For each performance, in the range of ticket prices, there are always \$15 tickets available for adults and \$13 student tickets for any seat at every performance.

The theater also offers intergenerational matinees of all of its mainstage shows for senior citizens and students in the morning for their convenience. Moreover, each production includes a sign-interpreted and audio-described performance for hearing- or sight-impaired audience members.

Additionally, GLT provides a diverse array of audience engagement initiatives. “For all of our shows, we have a series of experience-enhancement programming that affords audience members an opportunity to connect with our artists and our creative process,” Krispinsky informs.

These include a Thursday evening pre-show discussion entitled Salon Night that allows the audience to converse in a casual setting with directors, actors and technicians from the shows; a Friday night Happy Hour at the Hanna, with the bar opening 90 minutes prior to the show, to highlight the venue’s social amenities and casual setting that removes barriers to participation; Saturday afternoon pre-show discussions with a scholar before matinees and a Saturday evening Night Cap Night, where audience members can join the cast and crew at the bar in the Hanna after the play; and Ice Cream Social Sundays, a London tradition brought stateside.

NEW LEADS MOVING IN

Cleveland’s expansive variety of theaters that feature divergent missions and niches helps reduce direct competition for audiences, while also creating opportunities for a wider array of people to participate.

Mamai Theatre's four female founders, for example, made the decision in 2010 to stage plays with leading roles for women or written by women for women to direct.

"We felt that after the economic downfall in 2008, theaters cut their seasons short or made a lot of safe choices and hired a lot of men to direct a lot of other men in plays written by men," says Christine Madsen McBurney, co-artistic director. "We were fed up with waiting to be hired and wanted to have a place where local artists could work, especially women, making sure they were hired not just offstage, but onstage."

In addition to audience talkbacks and library discussion groups, Mamai's programming includes a unique opportunity for women members: Mommy Matinees on Sundays. Parents can pay \$3 to have their children participate in an arts-enriched drama workshop with a professional actor/teacher, while they enjoy the show. To build a younger audience and future theater professionals, Mamai also actively engages high school students – McBurney teaches at Shaker Heights High School—offering them a chance to break in with a small stipend and professional credits when possible.

McBurney anticipates audiences will also enjoy the fact that they will be performing in a "real theater" this season, when they move into the Helen at Playhouse Square. Additionally, Mamai collected a lot of audience surveys last season, and they plan to use the data to re-envision the way they engage audiences.

EARLY POINTS OF ACCESS

Alison Garrigan relies on what she calls a "5-second survey," too, that audiences are asked to fill out after each show. "We care very deeply about what every person in our audience is experiencing, what they think of it, and what we can do to make it better or more accessible," she says. The survey results have already impacted the curtain times and other programming decisions, such as recognizing the need to reach out to families that home-school as well as those with children who receive standardized education.

Six years ago, the acclaimed actor and theater artist saw a gaping deficiency in the city's theater scene and founded Talespinner Children's Theatre to produce professional productions for children ages 3-14 and their families. She says Talespinner implements a holistic approach to audience building by not just marketing to potential audience members for their shows, but to entire communities.

"We work very closely with the underserved communities and with people and members of the community who might not normally have access to the arts or arts education due to location, economics or lack of access to the media that might tell them about the arts," Garrigan explains.

She adds that they always make sure their plays will be enjoyed by all ages of children, not just their target range, and by the parents, too, to make it a complete family event. If the parents or younger children don't enjoy the shows, then they will be less likely to return. Ultimately, though, audience engagement is about engaging families from all communities.

"All of our programming, whether it's the performances, education, workshops or partnerships are all geared towards giving the different communities as many different points of access as possible," Garrigan says.