

It's all in the trailer

Neill Torbit gives an insight into using video online

If you consider that 35% of all UK theatre-goers currently use the internet to search for listings – and that both this and online ticket buying is set to double in the next four years – it quickly becomes clear that the future of theatre marketing is online.

If the future of marketing is online, then the future of online is video.

Google's recent £883 million purchase of YouTube demonstrates just how strongly it believes internet audiences are video obsessed.

In the UK theatre world, the National Theatre has quietly led the way with its online video strategy. With already a dozen e-trailers and

several micro-sites under its belt, the National has the most evident industry experience in this area. And since they've started, they've seen downloads of their e-trailers increase from hundreds to thousands since April 2006 (currently averaging around 4,000 per e-trailer).

Sarah Hunt, National Theatre's marketing manager, says the philosophy behind the e-trailers is simple. 'What we're not doing is giving people a segment of the actual theatre. Instead we make a kind of e-flyer, a moving poster with sound and images that evokes the play, gives a flavour of it.' Sarah



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believes that, beyond the obvious sales strategy for e-trailers, they also serve to extend National Theatre-goers' actual enjoyment. The trailers build anticipation and excitement before the event and provide a visual reference afterwards, not to mention to be forwarded to others as a recommendation of the production.

While admitting that being concerned about the future generation of theatre-goers is a bit of a cliché, Sarah's adamant that, if theatre is to continue to be relevant, it must engage with people on a level they relate to. She believes the trailers act to 'demystify' the theatre experience for non-traditional attendees and provide an entry point for a new generation in a language more easily understood. Think MTV.

As well as appealing to non-traditional theatre-goers, e-trailers should also be geared to existing attendees; probably not the core audience though (the 6% who buy 50% of the tickets), instead perhaps the Intenders (the 83% who only go once or twice a year). If you convince this group to go only once more a year, well, you do the math.

Advantages to using online trailers include potential audience, speed and measurability. But while the cost doesn't have to be massive it still comes at a price. The National absorbs this in-house by using their equipment and the equivalent of a full-time staff member. For smaller theatres this is impossible, but there are a number of ways to defray direct costs, including leveraging through existing sponsors (measurability is an attractive sell)

and offsetting from theatre marketing budgets (the e-trailers can serve to build theatre brand).

The National still prints leaflets and advertises in broadsheets, but for how much longer? Sarah agrees that, while online marketing is the future, it's not yet mainstream. Half the job now is educating people this is where they should look. But in the meantime, while leaflet and broadsheet spends are decreasing, there's an unfortunate but necessary double-up of cost.

Sarah believes the tipping point, when it becomes the major marketing tool, is near. But there's still a lot of exciting areas as yet undeveloped. The National's Digital Steering Group is currently examining their overall online strategy including how to incorporate such Web 2.0 strategies as blogging and feedback as well as including in video audience vox pops, interviews with writers/directors and behind the scenes. Mobile phone download is a whole new kettle of fish.

Sarah Hunt used to think of e-trailers as drag, another marketing tool she had to get her head around. Now, just over a year in, she's seen how they bring people together and the amazing reception they've

received. Now she's only excited by the possibilities.

Ten tips on making a good e-trailer:

- Shorter is better; it probably shouldn't be over a minute.
- The stage looks awful on camera unless you have a very visual set and specific lighting for video. Try getting the actors outside.
- A strong, simple idea will work every time. Be creative!
- Always include a 'call to action' at the end, including theatre contact info and dates.
- Accurately reflect the production: if it's funny, make the trailer funny.

But:

- Remember it's an ad. It's selling the show, not summarising it.
- Use good and if possible, varied music and clear audio.
- Make each production have its own unique visual style.
- Always include the theatre's brand. This is a great opportunity to build it.
- Remember it's for the web-quality will be reduced and it will be small. Lots of writing, intricate scenes and faraway shots won't work. ■



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