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Who do you want on your front row?

An introduction to the basics of marketing your event

*Let's presume that you want a full house, or a packed gallery, a "rush off the shelf" booksale, or a campsite filled with happy festival-folk, when you plan your event. This brief introduction is designed to help you go from idea to full house. It's about planning. It's called **marketing**.*

David Packard of Hewlett Packard is quoted as saying "Marketing is too important to be left to the marketers" and whether you have a marketing department, a marketing person, or not everyone who cares about their art, and wishes their event to be witnessed and enjoyed, needs to know about marketing.

Excuse me for using theatre as my basic example from now on. All other artform leaders may need to adjust the odd word – but the sentiment is the same. Whoever Comes are the Right People, Whatever happens is the Only Thing that Could – your task is to make sure the "right people" know, and are encouraged to be there and that what "happens" is going to get the desired result in the hearts and minds of the audience. The wonderful theatre manager I used to work with at the Theatre Royal Plymouth used to say that my job, as Head of Marketing, was to get the audience in to the theatre, her job along with her front of house teams and the artists on stage was to make them come back.

So back to the basic question. Who do you want on your front row?

Never assume that someone else is going to decide on all of this. Make it your business to think about the answers to this question. It could be something you do in the privacy of your own room, or it might be something you do with your team, your cast, or your community.

So why do it? Very simple. None of us have enough money to publicise the show or event in every medium to ensure that every person on the planet knows about the show. We want to spend the least possible amount of money and time on getting the message across to the people who will want to come to the show (and those that we'd like to want to come to the show.) In the trade that's called target marketing or narrowcast (as opposed to broadcast) marketing.

The strategy should include discussion about **Pricing** (how much can people afford, what do we think it's worth, are there incentives we can make to help fill weaker performances, or attract people who might shy away from the price). Then look at the event (or **Product** in commercial marketing speak). What are you actually hoping to sell? What are the different elements that make up the overall product? If you've chosen this play or event, or you are working on the planning for that event, then you will know more about it than anyone else. What are the selling features that make this event stand out?

Next have a think about your audience and understand where they live/work/spend time when they might make the decision to come to the event. It's no good splashing publicity all over your venue if there isn't much passing trade. That might feel good for the soul, and impress the staff and the actors – but it isn't going to sell tickets. So think about the **Place** that your marketing message is going to have the maximum impact. That place may be the kitchen table as the customer opens their post. It may be the mobile phone as they check Twitter. It may be the school common room as the teachers think of how to inspire their flock. It may be in the 24 local vegetarian restaurants around the town as you try to reach a very specific group of customers. And finally think about **Promotion**. How are you going to phrase the information, how will you be most persuasive in your message, and what medium will you use – print, radio, talks to groups, e-mails etc etc.

In marketing jargon these are the four Ps – Price, Product, Place and Promotion. Too many people muddle up marketing and promotion (or publicity) in the same breath. They are two different things. The marketing process of the planning and thinking about your customer process. Within the marketing mix you will then use different forms of promotion and publicity. But think marketing first.

For me the easiest way to start is to think of who I want on the front row. Who are the 5 people (say) who I want to be sure to reach so that they choose to spend 2hrs in a darkened theatre enraptured by my piece of work. Or they choose to walk up to my gallery and show their delight (and their cash) as they see my exhibition.

I suggest that at the very first stage of planning an event you think of these 5 people. Give them each a name and a backstory. Make sure you know their age range. Make sure you think where they might go to work or play. Think about other shows and entertainment they may also enjoy. Think about their family. Do they buy the ticket? Do they attend the event alone? Are they coming in a group where another person has planned the trip and booked the coach? Are they brought by a parent or a teacher? Know your 5 key customers. Really know them.

If you identify them then it's much easier to think about the price that they might be able and willing to pay. It's much easier to think of where they might be when they hear about the show and get excited enough to book. It will be much easier to think what elements of the product most appeal to them – and remember each one of the 5 members of your front row may be there for very different reasons. And finally you will then be able to think through the right promotion that will be seen / heard in the right place, excite with the right message, and offer the right price to get them to buy.

Whether I'm talking to a hugely successful Brazilian producer about the promotion of a new production of Miss Saigon, or working with a new show being created by my wife's Authentic Artist collective, or thinking who might come to my own CGO Surgeries. I start with the very basic question. Who do I want on my front row?

We don't usually have the time, the luxury, or the money to "test market" our shows. We can't mount a production and play it for a week to see whether our marketing mix is right, and then realise the theatre is empty and shut for a few weeks to change all the publicity material and try again. You can see desperation in the eyes and actions of some producers some time when a show isn't working. Suddenly the mass adverts come out, the new poster, the new offers, the mountains of direct mail letters to anyone who has ever passed their data details. That is broadcast marketing because the narrowcast marketing was either never done, or misfired badly.

I've had my fair share of mis-firing campaigns. I am happy to share the horror stories face to face with anyone – but you'll excuse me not broadcasting the details to everyone. I continue to beat myself up about a few poster images, which in hindsight were never going to hit their target. I have written some spectacularly bad copy for a few shows, which as a result completely misread the audience. And I have stood in despair at the back of an auditorium watching a wonderful show with an empty house wondering what I did wrong. In each case I did think about my 5 members of the audience for my front row. I did discuss it fully with my colleagues. I did make decisions based on narrowcast marketing. And I was wrong. I keep learning. One of the problem with live theatre is that you can't always see the finished show (or sometimes even the script or synopsis) before deciding on the 5 audience members and the campaign to reach them. That's life. We didn't choose to work in the arts because it is easy.

So Whatever Happens is the Only Thing that Could, and Whoever comes are the right people (or don't come). That's the nature of life [and for those interested these are two of the principals of Open Space Technology]. The wheels of life will keep on turning. A new challenge will be presented at your door. A new project will need an audience. And there'll be another chance to think of the 5 people who should (or could) be there.

If you are lucky enough to work with an organisation which can build up a mailing list. Or you work with an organisation that has a reputation for good work. Then there are times when you can mine your existing audience and reputation to fill the house. You might get 70-90% business just by putting the name of the show on a post-it-note on the front step of the theatre. I guess David Bowie and Kevin Spacey in the National Theatre production of Play X directed by the new artistic director of the theatre with all tickets at £10 and featuring some cute donkeys and some winners of x-factor plus the most amazing cameo from the new Doctor would do ok. Maybe you don't need to do much marketing to make that sell. Well ok then you may have some time on your hands. How about spending that time doing exactly the same process but with a slight twist. Who would like love to have on the front row who might not have seen our theatre, or realise that we have tickets available and we want them to see our work? Who is not coming to our shows. Who are we excluding just because of our success. And how can we encourage the next generation.

Everytime I start a new job or work with a new artist I ask the same question. I love getting a group of colleagues together and asking the same question. I love talking to a couple of successful (or stuck) creative artists who have never thought about marketing. I love the challenge, just occasionally, or trying to talk about narrowcast marketing with those who think marketing is something which is done by the lowest of the low, just one step up the ladder from the box office staff. And I love having that conversation with the staff of a box office – because they know their audience, often personally. They are talking to them every day.

To marketing departments everywhere I urge you to get away from the desk, away from the email, away from the office and go to talk to potential audiences, and look at current audiences, and talk to those who work with audiences. Statistics, databases, print schedules, press copywriting are all wonderful tools of the trade – but first and foremost get to know just 5 people in your front row.