

Speech given on March 1, 2004 at Wayne State University

The following is a speech I gave at Wayne State University regarding Arts in Technology. Many of the short notes I had reminding me to share an anecdote or use similar examples to ones given in the text have been removed to preserve the logical flow of the speech. The reader should know that one of the anecdotes was illustrative of how practices regarded as outdated were used to successfully restore a theatre's fortunes in a community where those practices were still very valid.

The Arts in the Age of Technology

The challenge of a theatre manager in an age of technology is a strange and contradictory one. In many instances, the manager is dealing with an audience whose perception of theatre may range between the extremes of viewing attendance as an unfamiliar and perhaps novel alternative to going to the movies or renting a video, to those who treasure theatre as an icon of culture that enriches their lives.

In order to maintain and cultivate an audience, the arts manager has to convince those whose experience of entertainment is defined by start and pause buttons that there is some value to them in an event that only occurs at a certain time instead of multiple showings each day, in a specific location instead of a "theatre near you," where etiquette requires you not talk with your friends and only has one or perhaps no commercial breaks. Even the person on the other end of the spectrum who treasures the experience of live performance and values the "old-fashion" pleasure of being personally escorted to a seat reserved months in advance for its premium sightlines has a growing expectation of information and service upon demand. Just because they are nostalgic for their theatre experiences 30 years ago, it doesn't mean they will tolerate the type of service an absence of technologies like computers and voice mail entailed.

Essentially, the core of theatre management in an age of technology is addressing the growing expectations of an audience. More and more, people are expecting to get what they want, when they want it, in their size and preferred color. You can go to an ATM at all hours of the day and night, call customer service or help desks around the clock and even order clothing custom cut to your exact figure over the internet. Seventy percent of customers think a business should know what they want if they purchase from that organization once.⁽¹⁾ For example, if you go to a dry cleaner every week, you have an expectation that they will know how you want your shirts pressed and not treat you as if you have never been there before.

Attracting and retaining an audience is no longer about good service, but rather about building a relationship with a patron so that the organization knows the specific things he or she values. Fortunately, computerized ticketing programs often have the sort of database functions that allow a theatre to do this. You can know that patrons have had seats G8 & G9 for last 5 years on Wednesday and not have to ask where they want to sit if they neglect to specify their preference on an order form.

Customer loyalty has little to do with satisfaction anymore. Of customers who defect, 80% are actually satisfied with the service they receive⁽¹⁾. Satisfaction does not equal loyalty. Someone can be absolutely satisfied with the comfort and cleanliness of their hotel room, but that isn't enough to prevent them from choosing your competitor the next time they are in town. Noting that they requested carrot cake, a down comforter, candles and bubble

bath the last time they were in town and having the room set up with these items the next time the person visits will probably go a long way toward securing their business for a very long time.

Price doesn't build a relationship. People don't really leave for a competitor if you are offering an object of comparable quality simply because they lowered the price, it is just the easiest excuse. Since it can cost up to ten times as much to attract new customers to a business than it does to retain current ones, (1) theatres need to focus on making it easy for current patrons to decide to return or resubscribe and on making it simple for new patrons to begin a relationship with the organization.

Adding value to the product you are offering can help develop a relationship. One option might be to provide programs that complement the experience. Offering backstage tours, study materials, specially priced tickets, institutes, play readings, Q&A periods with actors, audio described and signed performances can all make attendance accessible both physically and intellectually to those who may feel intimidated or just want to learn more. There are plenty of relationship building opportunities that exist for arts organizations.

This is all pointless, however, if the audience doesn't perceive value in what is being offered. Perhaps they aren't interested or perhaps things are being offered at times inconvenient for them. There has to be a dialogue with patrons. This is one of the hardest things to develop. When gathering information from people, there will be a small percentage of people who you can't offend no matter what you do, a small group you can't please no matter what you do, and the majority with whom you have to work on generating a relationship. The first two groups are usually the loudest—listening only to them will make you either feel you are the best or worst at what you are doing.

The real task is reaching the larger group and convincing them that you sincerely want to know how they feel and then acting upon the feedback you receive. The method for collecting this data is probably very much dependent on each organization. A theatre might call people up and solicit opinions or hand out surveys at performances or even question their box office staff as to the sort of comments they are getting. The method employed by a theatre serving a community will differ from a theatre that has a high frequency of tourist business because the window of opportunity for collection of data varies greatly. What matters is asking the right number of the right people the right questions.

You can get a strong sense of the success of your organization by collecting feedback solicited with the intent of learning "what can we do to make you come back for the next five years?" Every question, whether it be at the box office window or on a survey, needs to be posed with this in mind. Questions that ask people to rate restroom cleanliness on a scale of 1 to 10 can give you a nice average cleanliness number that you can turn around the next year and try to beat. It doesn't tell you that a person had a hard time finding the restroom, or that they had to wait on line or even that they didn't really mind having to wait, but because of mobility problems, the existence of stairs made the experience unpleasant.

Questions need to be open-ended, asking people how they would characterize their experience when it came time to make reservations, find their seat, and use the restroom. Patrons may also be asked how they prefer to be communicated with. Do they hate being called and reminded to resubscribe? Would they rather have a subscription form mailed to them and then periodic post cards sent to remind them? Or are they totally confused by the subscription form and having someone call and take their order over the phone is a godsend?

These types of questions allow you to find out what aspects of the entire experience need to run smoothly in order for a specific person to enjoy themselves and what aspects don't they really care about as much. The data isn't as easy to process as raw numeric values are and it is impossible to provide the myriad of restrooms to meet each person's specific wants and needs. The most accessible restroom will inevitably be most crowded. With enough information however, trends that simple numeric data can't report will emerge and can be acted upon. In the long run, it may even save money if you learn that certain programs, features of the facility or methods of communication are not effective, and are in fact detrimental to the relationship with patrons.

That being said, I recently read an article that said there was a single perfect survey question: the December issue of *Harvard Business Review* in an [article by Frederick F. Reichheld](#). Through two years of research, Reichheld searched for the optimal, single-question customer survey, to help companies gain quick, accurate, and actionable information about their audiences. Here's what he found:

"It turned out that a single survey question can, in fact, serve as a useful predictor of growth. But that question isn't about customer satisfaction or even loyalty -- at least in so many words. Rather it's about customers' willingness to recommend a product or service to someone else."

He goes on to suggest that more complex customer satisfaction surveys actually cloud our ability to act in responsive and innovative ways.

The question he came up with is:

"How likely is it that you would recommend [company x] to a friend or colleague?"

The reason he says this is so important is because by recommending something, the person is putting their reputation on the line and they will only do that if they are intensely loyal.

Building a relationship isn't exclusively for patrons either. I have done the same thing with volunteers for a festival. They could sign up for specific shows and shifts on line. I kept track of their relationships with family and friends as well as their preferences. I would call them if I saw a person they usually request volunteering with wasn't coming or didn't sign up yet. I had the volunteer manual on line so new volunteers could download it from there rather than me mailing it.

This applies to Press as well--get better coverage if you give them the information in the format they like. Perhaps even provide them with an electronic press kit on CD with press releases and photos easily accessible. Maybe even have a password protected portion of your website where they can download the information and photos from--make it easy for them to cover you.

While there is plenty a theatre can do to make purchasing tickets easy and enhance the experience of attending a performance via the level of service provided and through various programs that complement the performance itself, there are many elements that a theatre doesn't control that could cause a person to have a poor experience overall. Some of these elements are common to theatres in general like weather, traffic, parking and cell phones going off during a performance. There are other elements that are unique to each organization.

Good examples of organizations that have excellent programs which complement an

experience but are in a situation that might undermine an audience member's enjoyment are the [Utah](#) or [Oregon Shakespeare Festivals](#). Most audience members for the festivals are not residents and are traveling a great distance to a fairly small city with which they are unfamiliar. They don't know the quality or availability of restaurants, lodging or how to get there. As opposed to Orlando where you know there are places to stay, restaurants, and big signs and billboards directing you to them from hundreds of miles away. If it turns out you aren't too excited by your experience, you can easily go to another attraction.

While these theatres can't really control this entire situation, they can make it easy for a prospective traveler to decide to attend and minimize any sense of anxiety. One such area is hotel and hospitality. Since so many people must make a conscious decision to travel in order to attend performances, the Festival can coordinate with a number of hotels, bed and breakfasts and perhaps RV campgrounds on a number of projects to facilitate this decision and enhance the experience of visiting.

In addition to having links to area hotels, B&Bs, and campgrounds on their website to make it easy for visitors to find lodging, they might also create a small welcome pack with a personalized itinerary could be created for patrons who were seeing a certain number of performances over the course of a few days. Placed in their hotel room or presented at the front desk, this might be especially useful and welcome by patrons who had yet to pick up their reserved tickets and don't recall their exact arrangements. The packet could be created by Festival or hotel staff dependent on how information sharing was arranged.

A similar program can be run in partnership with local restaurants. Allowing people to plan ahead and make reservations via a web page for dinner would be a boon for both patrons and restaurants, especially if the restaurant was committed to "get you to the theatre on time" table service. Asking people what hotel they are staying at would enable the restaurant to add themselves to any itinerary the hotel was providing or allow them to simply leave a reservations reminder message with the front desk.

These programs may seem strange to suggest since if they are executed correctly, the Festival's efforts are nearly invisible despite all its hard work and its efforts result in an improved reputation for hotels and restaurants. It is also very labor intensive to collect the requisite information and create packets. The objective is to take organizations that already know they greatly benefit from the Festival and make them stronger partners in the Festival's single goal of making the patrons' experiences so great from the moment they arrive, they are willing to return to spend their money for the next five years.

Relationship building with patrons isn't the only use for technology for an arts organization. It can also be used as a tool to improve the management of the organization itself. I have recently been reading a lot about the concept of [open source](#) as applied to the arts. For a long time it has been used in connection with software development, most notably regarding Linux. However, I have recently seen it discussed in [regard to the arts](#).

One of the applications of this idea is certainly [open book management](#), a term apparently coined in 1995 by John Case who wrote for [Inc.](#) magazine:

"The beauty of open-book management is that it really works. It helps companies compete in today's mercurial marketplace by getting everybody on the payroll thinking and acting like a businessperson, an owner, rather than like a traditional hired hand."

The practice has also been extended beyond employees to provide information to vendors

and other organizations whose dealings are closely entwined with ones company. The question then is--can the same practice work with an arts organization's employees, patrons and local arts journalists? According to the [articles](#) written since 1995 in *Inc.*, companies have realized some actual benefits from adopting this approach. While there are some cautionary tales about sharing too much information or sharing it in the wrong way, the most widely cited result is usually that the practice empowers employees by educating them about where costs are high and places them in a position of being responsible for finding ways to cut the expenses and increase profits.

Most non-profits are already in a quasi-position of being open book organizations as they have to file financials with the state and those filing are available public scrutiny and often accessible online. It is a far different thing though, to eliminate all the searching a motivated person would have to do to acquire this information and publically invite patron and employee review. An important part of open book management is to educate those involved about what they are looking at when they review financials. As with the for-profit application of the open book philosophy, the benefit would be that an employee or patron can make educated suggestions and contributions to improve the organization.

I have seen some arts organizations use this approach, but only when financial crisis threatened and they desperately needed sympathy and understanding. At that point, one organization I was working for was revealing inner workings with IATSE leaders in order to come to an agreement and were briefing the local arts writers weekly about all the efforts being made to turn things around.

Obviously, you want to open your books long before a crisis approaches with an eye toward preventing one. If you do end up in a crisis, it would be beneficial to have employees/patrons/arts journalists who completely understand every element that contributed to the problem and are thus more sympathetic than they otherwise might have been.

Now certainly one of the reasons the open book approach to management works is that employees, vendors and major customers of companies have a fair understanding of the forces which affect industries related that company. This isn't necessarily true with an entire patron base, so opening everything to everyone might prove counterproductive when employees are constantly explaining and justifying decisions to people who understand the business of the performing arts to widely varying degrees.

You also can't open every aspect of a performance to the public. Direction, design and performance choices can't be done by committee and retain quality. It is possible to involve arts writers more integrally during the creative process and perhaps get more complete coverage than just a review.

I did read an article recently that talked about covering the arts like sports. It quoted a portion of a [speech by Chris Lavin](#). (senior editor for the San Diego Union Tribune) delivered to an APAP convention in 2002.

Mr. Lavin's speech caused quite a [debate](#) with many detractors feeling that such coverage would cheapen how people viewed the arts.

One of the things I have found interesting in the articles I have read advocating sports type arts coverage is the idea that sports writers have a relationship with the people they are writing about and have strong opinions about relative strengths and weakness of people and teams. This doesn't seem to be the case with arts writers who, in some instances don't want any relationship lest it destroy their objectivity. But it isn't all their

fault either:

Mr. Lavin writes:

"When compared to the open access a sports franchise allows, most arts organizations look like a cross between the Kremlin and the Vatican. Casting is closed. Practices closed. Interviews with actors and actresses limited and guarded. An athlete who refuses to do interviews can get fined. An actor or actress or director or composer who can't find time for the media is not uncommon. How would a director take to a theater critic watching practice and asking for his/her early analysis of the challenges this cast faces with the material -- the relatively strengths and weaknesses of the lead actor, the tendencies of the playwright to resist rewriting?"

It was sort of amusing to me to think about arts writers going to early rehearsals like sports writers go to training camps and opining about how good the cast was going to be during the upcoming season. Imagine an arts writer mentioning the fact that the training program an actor is coming out of is strong on period acting and also stresses Meisner and thus her presence in the Feydeau farce promises good things for the production. But that is the type of indepth analysis readers of the sports pages get every day. Is it crazy to think more people might become interested in the arts if newspapers encouraged their arts reports to write such involved pieces (and gave them the resources to do it)?

Another area where the open source idea has really made head way lately is the internet itself, especially in relation to blogging. Howard Dean's campaign really brought attention to [tools](#) that would enable people to organize grassroots support for a purpose. Non-profit organizations are already picking up on the trend to help them with [fundraising](#). In a recent issue of Business 2.0, they wrote that [blogging had big implications for business](#). They mentioned a common perception was that the only people who blogged were teenage girls, but this is not the case. But in fact:

"Folks have forgotten that blogs work because people have something to say and others find what they say valuable. Our business culture works the same way -- it runs on the currency of influence, authority, and relationships. People who have strong and well-informed opinions command respect and become influencers; they win deals, drive decisions, and ultimately determine the fate of companies."

This technology has a great deal of potential for the arts. Actors/directors/designers can post blogs on an arts organization's website talking about the progress a show is making in rehearsals, etc. There would be a fair amount of value added to an avid performance goer's experience if they could read about decisions that were being made, discarded and then perhaps revisited by the various people involved. When they went to see the show, they would better appreciate the process that went into every move that was made.

As a performance continued its run, the actors might reflect on their changing approach to their roles. In fact, access to material that portrays decision making closer to the moment it is happening might enhance the learning experience of acting/directing/dance/design students much more than a Q&A session with an artist. Often when an artist is doing a Q&A, their person's relationship to the decision making process is much more remote and abstract. Writing about their experience and process at the end of a day or even a week is much more immediate and telling. Having performed the reflective exercise of blogging about their experience, an artist who is doing such a Q&A session might be more cognizant of their process (or simply able to reread their writings in preparation) and able to impart insights of greater value than he/she previously had.

The same section of the website containing the blogs for a certain production could feature an area where patrons could make comments about that production. There is a certain danger inherent to providing people with a forum to discuss their experiences at your organization. Not only do you run the risk of angry actors and designers making scathing remarks about the director's behavior in rehearsal or audiences berating the quality of your show, but you also suffer some credibility problems if you censor the bad out while presenting the forum as a completely candid representation. The bogus reviews to discredit or overly praise authors recently discovered on the [Canadian version of Amazon](#) is only one example of this problem. Only presenting positive comments or allowing anonymous postings can cause suspicion that something similar to the Amazon problem or the [faked Sony movie critic](#) is transpiring.

Essentially then, theatre management in an age of technology requires a theatre manager to be very much aware of old strategies for presenting performances and attracting audiences. The important things for a theatre manager to remember for the future is to find the strategies and programs which will allow them to establish a relationship with their audience. People are naturally more comfortable with the way things were and the way things were done and it is the older patrons which make up a great percentage of a subscribing audience. But managers have to be aware of the changing trends as well—those people who liked the way things were still embrace opportunities to get a better product faster. These strategies aren't necessarily the new, vogue ones. The tried and true programs that you have never employed can be beneficial as well. The key is providing people with the information they want, even information they didn't anticipate asking for when they contacted you.

Of course, in an age of gadgets and gizmos a theatre manager has to be aware of the opportunities and drawbacks an available technology presents for them. The internet has quickly become a valuable tool for presenting huge amounts of information very cheaply without having to incur the costs and time required to make changes the way printed material does. But the information has to be timely and organized in an easy to understand manner. It is easy to flip around the pages of a book but in internet, hyperlinks are the fingers. You need to be able to predict what information someone will want to access at what point in their surfing experience. On the other hand, offering all possible options everywhere clutters the screen with text and buries the pertinent information. The same thing holds true with voice mail—too many options and no opportunity to speak with a live human is alienating.

In an age of technology where people are able to access an expanding amount of information with increasing ease, it is incumbent upon the theatre manager to make it easy for their potential audience to choose to attend events at their organization. People are looking for a product that can be delivered within the parameters of their expectations and they possess powerful tools that aid in that search. Technology also provides the manager with these tools and enables them to furnish information as well as synthesize and track these expectations more economically than previously possible in order to build lasting relationships with patrons.

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