

RELATIONSHIP MARKETING AS AN AUDIENCE DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY FOR THE THEATRE

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Introduction

The importance of the audience to the practice and survival of the theatre is a well-known fact that cannot be over-emphasised. But the nature of the relationship of the audience to the theatre, and how this can be further strengthened, has been a contentious issue. This paper, therefore, sets out to look specifically at audience development as a function of the marketing strategies of theatre organisations. It seeks to promote the concept of 'relationship marketing' as a modern strategy for audience development in the growth of theatre.

The theatre has been subjected to a variety of definitions, ranging from the physical building and the event that take places within it. This event is of a special kind, and it is an embodiment of certain factors which all combine to actualize the experience. The basic elements of the theatre are usually categorized into four as follows:

- **The Idea:** Paramount to the theatrical event is the idea or the raw material. It is the basic element of a theatrical performance. The idea normally consists of segments of activities arranged in meaningful sequence, and each segment represents a step in the unfolding of a story. That is, the idea normally has a beginning, a middle and an end. Also, it consists of certain constituent parts, which include plot, characters, set speeches, actions and highly polished routine when arranged and shaped by the director.
- **The Personnel:** A dramatic masterpiece demands the creative cooperation of various artists and artistes – director, actors/actresses, dancers, singers, designers, managers, and so forth. The text of a play is as vague and as incomprehensible as the musical score of a concert before it is brought to life. It is the transformation that actors and other performers give a

script through their bodies and voices; the effects that designers devise with sets, costumes, lights, make-ups, stage props; and the ingenuity of the managers to attract the attention of the right audience to the show, that make the play come alive and become a worthwhile event.

- **The Physical Space:** Theatre cannot occur without a space. This is the specially designated environment where the show or performance takes place in the presence of an audience. This is usually a theatre building, comprising a stage (with a backstage space), and an auditorium in the western modern sense; but it could also be any suitable open space – a market or public square, a courtyard, or any other venue.
- **The Audience:** The full participation of the audience is a vital element of the theatre. It has been severally argued by critics that, until an audience sees a dramatist's piece of work on stage, it should not be considered as complete. J.L. Styan (1960) distinguishes clearly between words written and words seen and heard, and says 'a play is the response of an audience to its performance.' It is clear that the audience in a theatrical event is imperative. When there is a group of people watching a play, reacting to it, participating in it, responding to it, then, that experience, which theatre seeks to provide, becomes complete.

It should be noted, however, that the audience in the theatre is not only a social or cultural factor, but an economic one. The audience is a body of customers, whose patronage plays an important role in the life of a theatre organization. The number of people who attend the offerings of a production company, the frequency of their attendance and the amount of money they are willing to pay each time they come, could have serious economic consequences on the survival or otherwise of the company.

In his book, *The Theatre Audience in Nigeria*, Jide Malomo (2002) affirms that the audience is so crucial to the theatre that the theatre can hardly exist without it. According to him, virtually everything in the theatre, including the repertoire, depends on the

audience and that, it is the audience which gives the theatre its meaning and *raison d'être*. In his own words:

It is the audience for which the playwright communicates his ideas and feelings, while the necessary visual and aural elements that enhance the communication of ideas are designed primarily for the aesthetic pleasure and appreciation of the audience (1).

The dictionary defines an audience as 'a group of people who have gathered together to hear or watch something' (Hornby, 1995:66). Elizabeth Hill *et al* (1998), similarly explain that the term "audience" can take on a variety of meanings in a variety of contexts. They identify three types of audiences as follows:

- (a) **Audience as art receptors:** This consists simply of those who experience art for the sake of the value of the art product without any desire or intention to patronize it. From a marketing point of view, this definition is of limited value, as it excludes the notion of intentions. It may be useful in considering the audience of public art, which may or not be actively sought by those who see it.
- (b) **Audience as associates:** This consists of those with whom an artist or an arts organization, had some form of communication, including those who support the arts in any way or who have interest in their development, such as governing bodies that fund the arts, regional arts boards, the press, donors, contributors and sponsors, including friends of the artists.
- (c) **Audience as customers:** This considers the audience as being involved in a transaction with the artist or an arts organization. This definition sees the audience as being those with whom the arts organization is trying to exchange something of value (Hill, et al, 1998:25).

Although our application of the concept of audience in this essay covers the three contexts mentioned above, the third group occupies a central place in our study. For marketers in the theatre, it is the most useful definition, as it implies that people make choices about the arts events they wish to attend, and are willing to offer something in return for that experience. Since our focus in this paper is on audience development, it is imperative for us to attempt a conceptual clarification of that term.

What is audience development?

Audience development is as much about increasing the range of audience, as it is about the size of audience. That is, the task of building an audience should be viewed as being more than just increasing the number of those who attend an arts event (though this is often a priority in the short term, usually for economic reasons). Rather, the task of audience development should be seen more as one of improving access to the arts for an increasingly wider range of people, and not just for the committed patrons. Audience development should, therefore, be seen in terms of size, scope and reach.

According to Elizabeth Hill, *et al* (1998), audience development also means a long term process of encouraging and assisting an audience member to become increasingly involved in the life of an arts institution. The goal, they say

is to build a loyal and committed audience with an appetite for adventure (17).

There are those who are already predisposed towards the arts. Morrison and Dalglish (1993:7) call them the "Yeses". But there are other categories of people who are potential attenders of cultural and artistic events, but who are yet to be identified and reached. This is the group of "Maybes" who need to be reached and persuaded to become regular attenders.

The duty of arts institutions and marketers, therefore, is to reach a larger group of people who are not as predisposed to, or as comfortable with, the arts; those who feel they do not know enough about the arts to be able to enjoy them. To keep the audience growing in the theatre, therefore, the arts must try and reach out to encourage, cajole, or entice this doubtful group to become active and regular patrons, to the overall benefit of the arts institution. This, we believe, can be achieved through a well-programmed commercial marketing scheme and audience development activities. This takes us to another crucial concept: marketing.

What is marketing?

Marketing is one of the big ideas of the twentieth century and, in recent years, it has become one of the most significant ideas in the arts. However, marketing is not a new phenomenon, because,

whether in the arts or in other businesses, economic transactions have always been going on between buyers and sellers of goods, services and ideas. If there are no customers, companies or organizations would have nothing but costs to record. Quoting Druker, a leading thinker and writer on management, Elizabeth Hill (1998:ix) describes marketing as 'creating and keeping customers.' When we talk of customers in the theatre, we invariably refer to the audience.

Eric Berkowitz, *et al* (2000) report that the American Marketing Association, representing marketing professionals in the United States and Canada, defines marketing as

the process of planning and executing the conception, pricing, promotion, and distribution of goods and services to create exchanges that satisfy individual and organizational objectives (9).

It is often erroneously thought that marketing is synonymous with advertising or individual commercial transaction. If anything, the above quoted definition confirms that marketing is a much broader and more complex commercial activity. The definition further stresses the importance of beneficial exchanges that satisfy the objectives of those who buy as well as those who sell ideas, goods, and services – whether they are individuals or corporate organisations. In other words, apart from goods and services, what is being 'marketed' might include ideas, people and places, projects (such as theatrical projects), a footballer, a political candidate, a tourist spot, or a place to go for vacation, and so forth. This is what William Stanton (1981) means by saying that

when you try to persuade somebody to do something – donate to the Red Cross, not litter the highways, save energy, vote for a particular candidate, or even accept a date with you – you are engaged in marketing (3).

To serve both buyers and sellers, marketing seeks (1) to discover the needs and wants of prospective customers and (2) to satisfy them. These prospective customers include both individuals buying for themselves and their households and organizations that buy for their own use (such as manufacturers) or for resale (such as wholesalers and retailers). According to Berkowitz *et al* (2000),

the key to achieving these two objectives is the idea of *exchange*, which is the trading of things of value between buyer and seller so that each is better off after the trade.

Marketing does not stop with the discovery of consumer needs, but involves taking concrete steps to satisfy those needs. However, because no organization can possibly satisfy all groups of potential consumers, there is the need to identify one or more specific groups towards which an organization directs its marketing programme. This is what is known as the *target market*, which informs the marketing strategies of the organization in question.

Having selected the target market consumers, the firm must take steps to satisfy their needs. Someone in the organizations' marketing department, often the marketing manager, must take action and develop a complete marketing programme to reach consumers, by using a combination of four tools, often called the 4Ps of marketing:

- **Product:** a goods item, service, or idea, to satisfy the consumer's needs;
- **Price:** what is exchanged for the product;
- **Promotion:** a means of communication between the seller and buyer;
- **Place:** a means of getting the product into the consumer's hands.

These 4Ps, also referred to as 'marketing mix', are the four functional variables open to the marketing manager or officers of the marketing department of an organization to manipulate and control in order to solve marketing problems. We shall now proceed to examine the concept of *relationship marketing*, and how customer relationships are built between organizations and their patrons.

Relationship marketing

The hallmark of effective customer relationship is today called *relationship marketing*, the process of linking the organization to its individual customers, employees, suppliers and other trading partners, for mutual, long-term benefits of all those concerned. Ideally, relationship marketing involves a personal, ongoing relationship between the organization and the individual customer. This, according to Berkowitz *et al* (2000:15) is the kind of relationship a rural nineteenth-century family in the United States probably had with its general store.

Applied to the theatre, relationship marketing is a concept directed towards building a committed, loyal and stake-holding audience that will continue to share in the life of a theatre organization. As far as Elizabeth Hill *et al* are concerned, theatre marketing is basically relationship marketing, a perspective which emerged in the 1990's as a model on which to base marketing thinking in the arts. Instead of limiting itself to tactical selling or promotional activity in order to maintain or increase patterns of purchase, arts marketing should address the issue of forming and maintaining long-term marketing relationships with the customers. Such a relationship is not only essential for the financial security of the affected arts organization, but it also enables it to fulfil its mission of entertaining and enlightening the audience on a more permanent basis. D. K. Smith (2001:471) observes that by building a long-term relationship with their customers, some organizations have been able to record impressive sales and profits, even when overall market demand is down, and other organizations are performing poorly or even withdrawing from the market.

It is axiomatic that any successful business is people-centred and people-driven; it is the customers who provide the motivation for the development and progress of any enterprise. There are those who believe that the place of the people in service industries becomes even more strategic with intangible product offering. For the marketing of goods and physical products, the potential customers are more readily identifiable. In service-oriented industries, the consumers sum up the organization in terms of the ways in which the staff or personnel behave towards them. For instance, the indifferent or hostile waiter defines the restaurant. The unfriendly or discourteous box office staff or ticket checker defines the theatre organisation. D. K. Smith (2001:486) says that employees who are truly pro-customer deliver consistently good service, which can be used to build special bonds with the customers. Hence, there is the need to motivate the staff to give of their best. Service firms must endeavour to train and encourage their staff, particularly those of them in direct contact or interaction with the customers, to guarantee customer satisfaction on which the ultimate survival of the business depends.

In order to deliver high quality service, marketers must get everyone in the organization to be customer-oriented and customer-

friendly. In the peculiar case of the theatre, customer expectations are undoubtedly very high, perhaps even higher than in many other service industries. In the industrial market set-up for physical products, access to operatives is extremely limited. No customer expects to meet the packers in a sweet factory, for instance, whereas in service markets, access is far greater, and the majority of the staff have one form of direct contact or the other with customers. Therefore, the extent of the knowledge and skill of staff should reflect the importance of the difference in expertise and approach as far as a service industry like the theatre is concerned.

Apart from the orientation of staff and personnel, relationship marketing in the theatre demands knowledge of attending to patrons, establishing constant communication with them and persuading them to buy tickets in advance. Buttressing this advance ticket-buying position with his subscription theory, Danny Newman (1999:89) says 'good relations with subscribers are a logical pre-requisite to obtaining the largest possible annual renewal.' He suggests that it makes sense to maintain some regular communication with the subscribers through newsletters, a journal of some publication containing news, photographs and feature materials concerning that performing arts company, its productions, plans and future expectations. In this way, it is believed that customer's sense of involvement in the organisation will be heightened, and their level of interest and commitment increased.

The subscription method of ticket sales, which is, more or less, an audience development strategy, was popularised by Newman, a Chicago-based press agent. He had been commissioned by Mac Lowry of Ford Foundation in 1961 to help the arts build a strong, permanent base of audience support. Bradley and Gordon (1993:28) report that 'Danny Newman began to preach the importance of subscription to the survival of arts organizations.' In his own book, Newman (1995:15) distinguishes between single ticket buyers and season subscribers. In recommending his audience development method known as "Dynamic subscription promotion" (DSP), he argues that there are a few unusual situations in the performing arts business where single tickets have been, or are being, sold in sufficient quantities to fill the house. According to him,

Theatres, symphony orchestras, dance companies simply could not exist without the backing of subscribed goers who comprise the largest of their audience (Newman, 1995:15).

The single ticket buyer, in Newman's view, may decide not to come to the theatre when the weather is too hot or too cold. He stays at home when it snows, rains, or whenever he feels tired or not just in the mood, whereas the subscriber, whom he describes as the ideal patron of the theatre, commits himself or herself well in advance of the season's programme, often many months in advance. Perhaps, because he or she has made this initial judgement, the committed theatre patron believes in the organisation, offers maximum support, and naturally delighted at every successful outing.

In addition to all this, customers in the service market, including the theatre, should not be seen or treated as faceless or unknown people. They are not just anybody in the crowd who, for instance, may walk up to an auto shop and write a cheque for a new car and drive it away without showing up ever again. Customers in the theatre are more appropriately referred to as "patrons" or "audience", and this has implications for the nature of interaction and the relationship which should exist between them and their serving companies. In most cases, the audience members are neighbourhood people, who may share an interest or could be persuaded to develop an interest in the activities of the theatre company. Also, some of the organization's staff may be known personally to the audience. Therefore, this relationship, which is, more or less, personal, must be fostered to yield positive mutual benefits.

According to an Internet source (*Essential Theatre*, <http://www.artscouncil.org.uk>, pages 1 & 2), theatre organizations are enjoined to develop the involvement and commitment of their theatre-goers, once they have been identified, so as to foster an intimate relationship with them. For instance, they can be persuaded to attend more frequently, to try different types of shows, buy subscription packages, pick up membership cards, or get involved in several other ways. If creatively managed, some theatre-goers can eventually get to the top of this development "pyramid" and become so committed that they can be persuaded to leave a legacy for what they have come to accept as "their theatre". The source concludes that

part of a theatre's marketing orientation should involve viewing its theatre-goers as long-term spenders with whom links must be built and nurtured (Internet source cited above).

Finally, apart from the general staff attitude to customers, which must be cordial, right and responsive, the box office computer databases can be useful in the collection, processing and analysis of information about theatre-goers. Such information can be collected at the time they purchase ticket, and this can be used to track, not only basic facts such as names and addresses, but also preferences for types of show, seat location and method of payment. It is also believed that if the prices theatre-goers pay, or prefer to pay, and the number of people who come with them are assessed through these data, their value to the theatre can be determined. The information stored in a theatre organization's box office computer system is thus a vital tool in knowing and building good relationship with audiences. What the management does with the information has an impact on the overall fortune of the organization. As Stephen Peithman and Neil Offen (1999) rightly observe,

any plan to increase the size of your audience begins with information. The more you know – about your own theatre company, your potential audience, your broader community, the marketing means at your disposal, and other factors – the more likely you are to be successful (3).

In conclusion, a relationship-based marketing strategy that will be mutually beneficial both to the patrons and the arts institution is strongly recommended. It is a useful tool in the cultivation and development of audiences for the theatre, and a good strategy for generating money, which, ultimately translates into financial solvency and a brighter prospect of survival as a business enterprise.

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