A ROLE FOR MARKETING PROGRAMS IN UNIVERSITY/PERFORMING ARTS ALLIANCES

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ABSTRACT

Early in 1996, Joanne Scheff and Philip Kotler published an article in the Harvard Business Review demonstrating how the arts can prosper through strategic collaborations. The alliances that were the foci of the article involved other arts organizations, other nonprofits, and businesses; however, the article failed to mention the potential benefits of an alliance between arts organizations and universities. A university appears to be natural for developing long-term mutually beneficial strategic alliances with arts organizations. This paper explores and describes the benefits that can be gained by both the arts organization and the university, with particular emphasis on the role for marketing education in this type of alliance.

ARTS IN THE 1990'S

Most arts organizations in the United States are facing some type of difficulty. As Scheff and Kotler (1996) note, growth has come to a halt and shrinking audiences are the norm. Contributions are down, government funding has been curtailed dramatically and it is not unusual to see debt levels rising. Symphony orchestras, such as the San Diego Symphony, have found themselves drowning in debt with no alternative but to file for bankruptcy. The growth in the arts, which the 1980's fostered, is no more. To survive in today's environment, arts organizations are becoming leaner and more business oriented (Scheff 1996).

In response to changes in the environment and their fortunes, the trustees and boards of arts organizations are undergoing dramatic shifts. Whereas Ostrander (1984) cited it to be fairly common for wealthy individuals, especially upper-class women volunteers to be asked to serve as trustees and on boards, Whitt and Lammers (1991) say, "...the stereotypical 'ladies bountiful' of the arts boards of the past...are being supplanted by corporate executives (p. 280). This shift is due, in part, to the arts organizations' need for some specialized skills (LeBlond 1988). Among the various types of business skills and expertise that are needed is the need for marketing expertise.

Cultural institutions are finding their older patrons are "fading away." In order to survive, arts organizations must seek and develop new markets. Developing strategies to appeal to new and different segments demands skill and expertise in marketing. For example, trying to appeal to a younger audience takes different approaches and strategies (Comte 1992, Miller 1996). The younger audiences have seldom been exposed to the classical or performing arts and therefore, to develop this market requires considerable efforts on the part of the arts organizations. Funding for arts education...has been cut drastically...when parents don't expose their children to the opera, ballet and symphony, children don't develop an interest in the arts (Comte 1992). However, relatively few arts organization have the requisite marketing expertise to accomplish this task.

MARKETING EDUCATION IN THE 1990'S

Just as arts organizations have been forced to rethink their approaches, marketing programs have also been asked to assess, evaluate, and consider new directions, one of which is to bring marketing education more in concert with marketing issues facing today's organizations. Beginning with the Porter and McKibben study (1988), the need for business schools to improve their relations and interactions with the business/organizational community has continued to be a major focus. The nature of the interactions is thought to carry some risks -- specifically that the outside organizations may gain too much direct influence in academic programs (Porter & McKibben 1988), however, through the choice of interactions and appropriate managing of the relationships, the risks are minimal.

The early 1990's posed some interesting challenges to schools of business, including marketing programs. After several years of "...slow but steady increases in the quality of students entering business school programs, the 1990's have witnessed a reversal of this trend"(Hugstad 1996). According to the AACS Newslime 1994, the proportion of Freshmen interested in pursing a business career dropped from 24.6% in 1987 to 14.4% in 1993. Newell and Titus (1996) report that marketing
programs appear to be more susceptible to this downward trend than other specializations.

One of the notable conclusions of the Newell et. al. study was that "... marketing students may find it more difficult to see the connection between their educational training and the basic knowledge and skills required to perform future marketing-related tasks" (p. 60). The authors further concluded that "Marketing educators... must explicitly demonstrate the connection between classroom learning and marketing practice" (p. 60). While this task may be accomplished in many ways, one way that is viable is for marketing programs to become involved in alliances with arts organizations. Such alliances yield many opportunities for marketing faculty and students to be involved in marketing planning and practice. This paper describes selected aspects of one successful university/arts organization alliance. The alliance involved both marketing faculty and students working with a regional performing arts center (hereafter called the Center). All parties agree that the benefits that have accrued from this relationship have enhanced the education of students, the expertise of the faculty, and the marketing programs of the performing arts organization.

UNIVERSITY LEVEL INVOLVEMENT

Before describing the specific involvement of the marketing program, there should be mention that the marketing program involvement is only one part of the total university/arts center alliance. Many other programs and divisions of the university are also involved with the performing arts center. For example, one member of the College of Business faculty serves on the fifteen member Board of Trustees; the computing and telecommunications division helped to set up the Center's Web site; the College of Education is a co-sponsor with the Center and the public school system for an interactive arts education program in local elementary schools; the faculty of Visual and Performing Arts have close working relationships with the Center; and the University has free use of the Center theaters for a limited number of performances. The University uses the Center facilities for a variety of off-campus conferences, workshops and planning sessions. Various classes and groups on campus have been given extensive backstage tours at the Center. In at least one instance well-known guest performers appearing at the Center have met with students and discussed various aspects of their craft.

FACULTY INVOLVEMENT

One member of the marketing faculty serves on the eight member marketing committee of the Center. This committee is composed of marketing professionals from major corporate citizens in the region. The opportunity to interact with these professionals has provided material for classroom lectures and excellent contacts for guest speakers.

The marketing committee reviews and approves all marketing plans of the Center. It reviews the Center's advertising and promotional literature, and participates in the development of various special promotions. The success of the marketing efforts are determined by ticket sales and customer satisfaction measures.

The marketing committee has access to all sales and marketing data for the Center. The Center is willing to allow usage of these data for various academic endeavors, such as, case studies, data sets for in-class computer analyses and a variety of other uses.

STUDENT INVOLVEMENT

Through the years of the association, many marketing students have been involved with the Center. The Center has provided opportunities for class projects, independent study projects, internships, and masters' projects.

Class Projects. There have been a total of six class projects that have involved the Center. Most of these projects involved market research students. The students, in teams of three or four students, worked with the Center marketing department on the following surveys: a member survey, a survey of members who did not renew their memberships, a survey of single ticket purchasers, a survey of subscription purchasers, a survey of both Community College and University student entertainment and arts preferences. Depending on the type of survey, the Center provided mail lists, mailing labels, and in some cases had a professional firm stuff and mail the surveys. All costs (printing, mailing, etc.) were paid for by the Center. The students in consultation with their instructor, worked with the marketing department to develop the survey instruments. The students coded the responses and created SPSS files for the data. Statistical analyses were run using university computers. The students wrote up the findings and made presentations of the findings to the marketing department of the center.
**Senior Experience Project.** A team of four students worked with the Center marketing department to conduct a study of area residents' awareness of and suggestions for improving overall programming. To obtain the necessary information, two focus groups were conducted followed by a survey of over 300 North County residents. The Center utilized this information to compose recommendations for improving the awareness and increasing community involvement with the Center.

**Independent Study Projects.** Each season the Center conducts a *One-Minute Survey* at a random set of performances. Between 300 – 500 one-page surveys are returned each season. Each year there has been a marketing student who chose to work with these surveys. The student post codes the open ended questions, creates an SPSS data file, analyzes the data, and prepares a written report. The student is provided with the results from previous years, so is able to develop a tracking of the levels of satisfaction, the complaints, and different services offered by the Center. The student works with a faculty advisor and the marketing director of the Center on this project. The final report, which is submitted to the marketing department, is reviewed by the marketing committee. Students who work on independent study projects are usually offered pro bono tickets to one or two performances.

**Internships.** The Center marketing department offers one or two internships each year. For the most part the internships involve media planning and buying, working with the community relations department, working with special promotions, writing up reports of ticket sales, and a variety of other "hands on" experiences. The internships are unpaid, but provide valuable experience for a marketing student. Students involved in internship activities are also frequently offered tickets to performances.

**Student Paid Employment.** Occasionally the Center needs to have work done which is appropriate for students. The Center contacts the marketing programs and arrangements are made to find a student who is interested in doing the work on a fee basis. For example, marketing students have coded questionnaires, input data, analyzed data sets, distributed promotional materials, etc., all of which have been done for pay. These are usually short-term projects that allow students to use their skills and expertise and also earn some spending money. In addition, the students may be offered tickets to one or more performances.

**Benefits to the Marketing Program**

Jeffrey Ford (1994) has suggested that "in-the-world" results shifts the context of student learning by putting them into an inquiry mode. He suggests that rather than fixating on coming up with a correct answer students seek what will work. All of the student involvement with the Center is focused on what will work within the pragmatic and practical context. Students are informed of the Center's budget and all other realities. Therefore, all recommendations are evaluated for practicality.

Weinstein (1995) has suggested that corporate recruiters look for students who understand the "changing and complex market environments." He believes that students must be prepared to deal with "business implications of . . . relationship marketing, marketing services, ideas, understanding." (p. 5) Most of the Center marketing projects meet these criteria. The changing and complex environment of performing arts marketing is a challenge to the most seasoned professionals. The whims of the audiences appear to change from one season to the next and finding ways to keep the people entertained and wanting to make return visits to the Center is a marketing situation that demands inquiry and rigorous analysis.

Most students who have worked on Center projects find listing their work on their resumes to be a positive with recruiters. The experiences they have had and the deliverables they have produced are concrete evidence of what they have learned in the marketing program. Feedback from students indicates that in some cases the Center marketing projects have been a determining factor in getting a desired job offer.

The marketing faculty members also gain many benefits from the alliance. Ready-made materials for case studies are a major benefit. The Center can provide materials on sales, membership campaigns, fund raising, pricing, advertising, promotions, and a variety of other topics. The Center itself provides guest speakers for classes and through contacts on the marketing committee, speakers from other organizations are available for presentations. These presentations have enriched many classes.

Working with the Center marketing staff also provides professional stimulation for marketing faculty members. While many of us do occasional consulting, developing a longer term relationship with the many different departments of the Center provides a unique opportunity to practice what we
teach. The Center is also very agreeable to providing marketing faculty with data sets, interviews, and other information that can be used for academic research. Overall, the marketing program has benefited greatly from its involvement with the center.

**BENEFITS TO THE CENTER**

The performing arts center also gains many benefits from its affiliation with the university and the marketing program. First and foremost, the Center receives good marketing advice and help at minimal costs. The work that is done by students and faculty have helped improve the marketing efforts of the Center, which has resulted in improved sales and customer satisfaction. This year approximately 250,000 individuals have attended performances and other functions at the Center, up almost 50,000 from last year’s figures. Ticket sales have increased by approximately 12% and memberships have increased by 35%.

The association with the university also brings many college students to the Center as patrons as well as workers. Once students have been to the Center and experienced a performance, they are likely to tell their friends—and make return visits. The alliance is mutually beneficial. Both parties have gained by working with each other. The opportunities for marketing programs should not be underestimated. By working with a nonprofit performing arts center, a marketing program can gain access to some wonderful opportunities for students, faculty and its course work.

**CONCLUSION**

Many marketing programs may be looking for ways in which to bring real world marketing experiences into the offerings. And most nonprofit arts organizations are seeking volunteer help. Most universities are located in areas where arts organizations exist. Bringing the two together can start by a phone call to the marketing or communications department of the arts organization. This simple act may lead to the development of a multifaceted alliance.

The alliance written about in this paper began by one marketing faculty member who made a phone call to a community leader who was then chairing the marketing committee. The Center was new and was seeking all the help it could get. The offer of service was greatly appreciated. Later that year, the first class project was initiated and the first independent study student conducted the first *One Minute Survey*. The Center was so pleased by the deliverables that future projects evolved. As the opportunities developed, additional faculty members became involved. There is every expectation that the relationship will grow and strengthen in future years, with more faculty members and more students becoming involved with different aspects of the Center.

It is a win-win situation.

References furnished upon request