



[American Lyric Theater](#) [What is ALT?](#) [Composer Librettist Development Program](#) [New Operas for New Audiences](#) [ALT Live](#)

[Blog: Behind the Spotlight](#)

follow



## BEHIND THE SPOTLIGHT

Why a blog from ALT? What do we have to contribute to the Blogosphere? Well, hopefully, a lot! ALT's mission is to develop New Operas for New Audiences, but as our programs take place primarily behind the scenes, we hope to shed some light on the process of developing new operas, as well as the development of the artists who are writing those new works. We hope you will join the discussion!

## RECENT POSTS

- [LET'S RECORD AN OPERA – A STUDY IN CREATIVE COLLABORATION](#)
- [THE AMERICAN-NESS OF AMERICAN OPERA DEPENDS ON AMERICAN AUDIENCES](#)
- [TWO NEW YEAR'S RESOLUTIONS FOR OPERA COMPANIES](#)
- [DEAR OPERA COMPANIES: ADVERTISING AND MARKETING AREN'T THE SAME THING](#)
- [DECONSTRUCTING THE MYTH – OPERA'S](#)

DEC  
07



By Lawrence Edelson · Comments (1)

Last week, [I discussed the myth that opera became unpopular as tastes changed](#); rather, opera was made unpopular. If you did not read that post, I'd suggest reading it before reading any further here, as it sets up a context for this discussion!

It is very common to hear opera companies assert that "poor marketing" is responsible for poor ticket sales of specific operas – or even entire seasons. I should be clear that there are a number of companies that are getting it right – but when we see companies in crisis, they aren't always willing to look at some of the fundamental reasons that have created the situations in which they find themselves. Take these two quotes from recent newspaper articles quoting the chairman of a major opera company (I am not attributing the quotes here because my point here is not to call out the individual making the statement, but the problems with the statements themselves and the mindset behind them):

## DEPOPULARIZATION

### CATEGORIES

- [Arts Administration](#) (11)
- [Commissions](#) (12)
- [Directing](#) (3)
- [Fundraising](#) (3)
- [Marketing](#) (7)
- [Performing](#) (7)
- [Singers](#) (6)
- [The Golden Ticket](#) (10)
- [Uncategorized](#) (3)
- [Workshops](#) (5)

### SEARCH

*"...\_\_\_\_\_ said part of his strategy could lie in marketing, getting the message out to people that XYZ COMPANY was doing the kinds of productions audiences should want to see."*

*"...\_\_\_\_\_ suggested that the company could have done a better job of marketing, given the disparity between the high quality of performances and the disappointing audiences. "It's our job to sell our wonderful company," he said."*

While I agree that poor marketing is likely very much part of the problem, what many companies are really saying is that poor advertising is responsible for poor sales – because their companies don't actually integrate comprehensive marketing strategy into their planning.

More importantly, it usually isn't the advertising that is at the root of the problem – even if their advertising is bad! When I begin to dig into the processes through which companies plan their seasons (as well as their associated programs), a true marketing approach is often nowhere to be seen. Advertising is part of marketing – but advertising is not the same thing as marketing – so what exactly is comprehensive marketing strategy ?

Let's go back to the basics. Management guru Peter Drucker asserts that **"there is only one valid definition of a business purpose: to create a customer."** Marketing theorist Theodore Levitt expands on that by stating that "the purpose of a business is to create and keep a customer. **To do that you have to produce and deliver goods and services that people want and value at prices and under conditions that are reasonably attractive relative to those offered by others to a proportion of customers large enough to make those prices and conditions possible.**" Philip Kotler considers the same issues from the perspective of mutual exchange. "The problem marketing has to solve is, How do I get the response I want? The answer marketing gives is that **you must formulate an offer to put out to the group from which you want a response.** The process of getting that answer, I call **exchange thinking.** What must I give in order to get? How can I add value to the other party in such a way that I add value to what I want? Reciprocity and exchange underlie marketing thinking." (qtd. in Drucker 76)

How can we produce opera that people want to see and will value as leisure time activity? What must we give audiences in order to get them in the door? How do we entice them into the theater for the first time, and how do we keep them coming back? What services can we provide for the community that will create affinity with the company outside of our primary venues, while simultaneously building a bridge to participation in those venues? How do we serve our mission and maintain artistic integrity while appealing to the values and priorities not only of ticket buyers, but also of donors?

What many are hesitant to explicitly accept is that we must approach opera as a business, because

the myriad of other leisure time options are positioned at consumers in an aggressively competitive manner. To think and act otherwise is naïve and destructive. **The business of opera does not mean that our art must primarily be a commercial offering, but it does mean that we must understand our consumers, both present and potential, as well as we understand our art.**

“Marketing is a way to harmonize the needs and wants of the outside world with the purposes and the resources and the objectives of the institution.” (Drucker 84) Kotler believes that **organizations often don’t have marketing in the right order**. The correct order, he asserts is that “first, do some **customer research** to understand the market you want to serve and its needs. Second, **develop segmentation** and be aware of different groups that you’re going to be interacting with. Third, **develop policies, practices, and programs** that are targeted to satisfy those groups. And then the last step is to **communicate** these programs. Too many[...] non-profit organizations go right into advertising before they’ve gone into the other three steps, and that’s really doing things backwards.” (qtd. in Drucker 82-83) In addition, opera companies often neglect one of the most important segments of the population when conducting market research – those who should and/or could be audience members. Companies traditionally have expended the majority of their energy on finding out as much as they can about their existing customers. “But even if you have market leadership, non-customers always outnumber customers. The most important knowledge is the potential customer. The customer who really needs the service, wants the service, but not in the way it is available today.” (Drucker 100)

Increased leisure time options in the past century have necessitated increased attention and focus on marketing. Marketing consultant Philip Kotler explains that “marketing really is spurred by the presence and the increase in competition that the institution faces in a way that it never faced before.” (qtd. in Drucker 80) **Marketing is often considered a subsidiary activity within an opera company – the division responsible for advertising and selling the product created by the artistic department**. Kotler argues that the “chief executive officer should, of course, be the chief marketing officer. Marketing doesn’t get anywhere in an organization without the head of the organization getting interested in it, understanding it, and wishing to disseminate its logic and wisdom to the staff and people connected with the institution.” (qtd. in Drucker 81) **Marketing is more than a department, “it’s really everyone in the organization pursuing one goal and that is to satisfy the customer, to serve the customer.”** (qtd. in Drucker 83) Kotler further asserts that non-profit organizations often confuse marketing with either hard selling or advertising, and, therefore, don’t show an aptitude for it. **“The most important tasks in marketing have to do with studying the market, segmenting it, targeting the groups you want to service, positioning yourself in the market, and creating a service that meets needs out there. Advertising and selling are afterthoughts.”** (qtd. in Drucker 74)

Kotler also asserts that, while many organizations believe they are consumer-minded, they are more often in touch with the needs they would like to serve without understanding those needs from the perspective of the customers. They dangerously “make assumptions based on their own interpretations of the needs[...]" (qtd. in Drucker 75). Simply put, most opera companies are product-oriented companies. **Opera administrators, who passionately love what they produce, often allow their passion for their art to overshadow a realistic sense of the environment in which they operate.** “It seems so obvious to most of them that they are satisfying a need, so clear that everybody who has that need must want the service the non-profit institution has to offer. One central problem is that too many non-profit managers confuse strategy with a selling effort. **Strategy ends with selling efforts. It begins with knowing the market** – who the customer is, who the customer should be, who the customer might be[...]. The non-profit institution needs a marketing strategy that integrates the customer and the mission.” (Drucker 99)

The key, of course, is knowing the market – or our potential audiences for opera. But what do we really need to know, and what are the different target groups that make up an opera company’s potential constituency? What is the best way to segment the market for opera companies? All that and more in my next post...!

FOR FURTHER READING, here is the book I reference above:

[Drucker, Peter F.. Managing the Non-Profit Organization: Principles and Practices. New York, Harper Collins, 1992.](#)



Categories : [Arts Administration](#), [Fundraising](#), [Marketing](#)

Comments (1)

## Comments

*Jennifer* says:

[January 10, 2012 at 2:45 pm](#)

This is great, Larry. It's very focused, and you're certainly asking the right questions.

### Leave a Reply

Name (required)

Mail (will not be published) (required)

Website

Submit Comment