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CENTERPIECE

FOCUS ON: MARKETING

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BRANDING: FROM CATTLE RITUAL TO COMPANY MANDATE

BY JIM ROYCE

Last spring, we asked marketing directors in TCG's constituency about some of the key challenges facing them today. Many smaller and mid-sized companies wanted to know more about enhancing their organization's branding or brand image. Others wanted to know about how to find people who could help them understand their brand better.

Branding has been a very hot topic in corporate America, as companies learn more about their relationships with customers and how those customers evaluate their products and services. Through research and construction of a brand platform, companies spend considerable time and energy staying close to their customers opinions, making adjustments in the management of brand images to keep them relevant, and enjoying success on the bottom line because customers value the company's products and delivery.

A strong brand is a very real tangible asset and is, in fact, an intellectual property. It builds equity as an investment from a financial point of view and in the minds of consumers. At the time Pets.com, the pet supply company, folded last year, its single biggest asset was the brand and a handpuppet. The company collapsed so quickly, but the public still held the company's brand in a favorable position.

Several brands can live within a parent brand. For instance, Coca-Cola owns Minute Maid and several other beverage brands and each, in turn, maintains sub-brands like Diet Coke and Sprite. Public acceptance of each sub-brand is critically important to the next parent above it and to the corporate parent at the top. Remember when Coca-Cola badly mismanaged its core product by changing its formula? Public reaction was swift. To save face, the company was forced to retrench and rebrand its original cola product as "Coca-Cola Classic." And what happened to the reformulated "new" Coke? It seems to have disappeared. What can we learn from Coke's debacle? Coke's example illustrates the importance of learning what is unique about your company's productions and services through the eyes of your patrons.

Marketing Issues *Centerpiece* Curator: Jim Royce, Director of Marketing & Communications, Mark Taper Forum and Ahmanson Theatre. Copyright © 2002 by Theatre Communications Group, Inc. All articles reproduced by permission of the authors. No portion of this publication may be reproduced in any form, or by any means, including photocopying, without written permission from the publisher or author. Theatre Communications Group, Inc., 355 Lexington Ave., New York, NY 10017, telephone (212) 697-5230, fax (212) 983-4847, website: www.tcg.org. Ben Cameron, Executive Director; Joan Channick, Deputy Director; Christopher Shuff, Director of Management Programs; Rachel Ford, Management Programs Associate.

Also in this *Centerpiece*, Margie Romero with Pittsburgh's City Theatre, reports on her company's efforts to get out of the slow-moving board committee syndrome. I often encourage companies to have, at least, one member of the board from a prominent advertising agency. The one-to-one relationship this member can have with marketing staff is often fruitful, if both staff and board member work toward well articulated goals and objectives in a marketing plan.

In addition, Claude Blakely, with Centre Stage — South Carolina! in Greenville, writes about his experience developing a stronger brand image with the help of a local friend of the theatre. People who have something to contribute or perform as a volunteer, don't have to be elected members of the board. Or the board may form a committee of its members and ask a key executive to serve as an *ex-officio* member, especially when an important project, such as branding, begins.

And finally, I would like to recommend a resource — *Arts Reach* is an outstanding newsletter for the arts marketing professional. Contributors to *Arts Reach* are interdisciplinary, with articles from museums, orchestras and theatres. The cross-pollination of ideas is often helpful. Check out their website at www.ArtsReach.com.

BRAND FUSION: INSPIRATION AND ASPIRATION

Your company has a brand — whether you want one or not. Your company can choose to ignore it or accept and build upon the images people have about your brand and how it represents the work on stage. By managing your brand you can help patrons sort through the clutter of many images to focus on a few that are truly engaging and crucial to your company's reason for being.

Many theatrical companies have built solid foundations for establishing and maintaining strong brands. Others are having difficulties articulating a brand platform that reaches across several company identities. Remember, you may have several brands to manage: one for the mainstage work, another for new play development, another for customer service, and, in some cases, the "name and personality" of the artistic director can be part of a brand package.

What Is a Brand?

It is not just a logo for your company, artistic statement or organizational mission. It is not about your productions or services alone. A brand is all about how your customers value the experiences they've enjoyed in your theatre, how they trust your organization to deliver quality, and what they expect you will present in the future. In physics, fusion is defined as a nuclear reaction in which atomic nuclei combine to form more massive nuclei resulting in a simultaneous and enormous release of energy. A brand can be thought of as a fusion between the emotional and the functional parts of the theatrical experience and the services that surround it, releasing an attractive energy.

As people experience your work, images and expectations begin to form. Your patrons "brand" you. You can accept and grow the brand by introducing new, supportive and complimentary experiences. Or you might want to "change" your customers brand view by actively engaging them and altering their perceptions.

Customer Relationships: Like a Good Garden, You Cultivate Many

Think for a moment about the variety of relationships your organization has with consumers and supporters. The fusion generated by the brand, and the images supporting the brand, attracts attention to different levels of consumer hierarchies: for instance, between you and your current long-term patrons (the core loyalists), customers who are infrequent attendees (the occasional buyer), those who have just discovered your organization (the newbies), the people who are about to become new patrons (the testers), and between you and the folks who have not yet heard about you (the unaware). Finally, and perhaps the most disconcerting, what sparked the de-fusion between you and the consumers who were once loyalists, occasional buyers or first-time attendees and, for one reason or another, became disconnected and may now have negative views of your brand.

There are other relationships, aside from patrons, who are influenced by your branding: print and electronic media, corporate and foundation donors, neighborhood retailers, restaurants, hotels, government officials, travel agents and other theatres in your city and around the nation, to name just a few.

Actors are often admonished for "anticipating" an action or reaction with another actor. But as a manager, you must build an awareness and anticipation for how people will think and feel about their experience with your organization from the moment they first hear about you, to the time that they move on (sometimes for reasons totally unrelated to or because of their experience with your organization). How well does everyone in your organization understand this brand fusion among so many different patron points of view?

Managers spend huge amounts of time, money and resources to retain the core loyalists — and rightly so — without often paying equal attention to building stronger bonds among the other patron relationships, which tend to be more fragile and need nurturing to gain preference and loyalty at various levels.

Branding is all about how people recognize and appreciate your organization, both through productions and service. It is also about how they believe you can deliver promises they can count on over time.

What's Unique About Your Company: What Do Your Patrons Think?

At the core of a well-known brand is a simple idea that patrons can quickly grasp. Branding experts like to call it the “great idea,” captured in a few words. Walt Disney Company’s brand idea is “magical family entertainment.” Over the years, Nike’s brand has focused on your — not their — “personal achievement,” meaning your sporting achievement with their products. In your mind, how do those two ideas resonate for you when you think about the efforts those companies expend to underscore the support for their customer’s loyalty and preference?

If you say your productions are on the cutting edge, do your patrons agree or really care? Your literature might state that patrons receive top-priority service. Did Ms. Past Subscriber not renew because she perceived a less-than-sympathetic box office person who could not provide her with one special request? How do you think Mr. First Timer felt when he arrived ten minutes late because he didn’t know the best route or was confused about parking and had to watch the

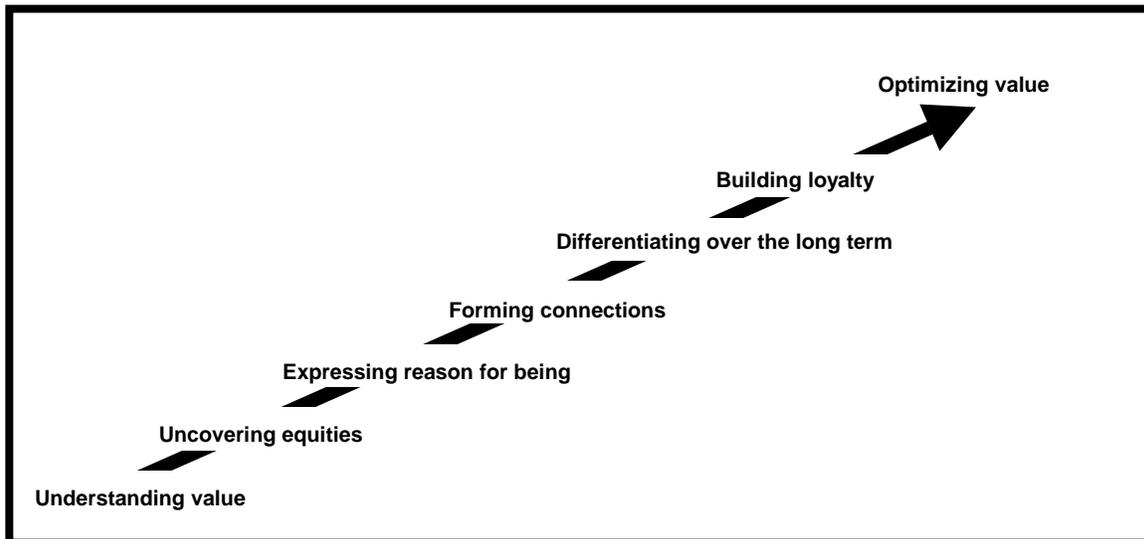
video monitor until there was a break? Could you have made his experience more comfortable by providing a map and a list of restaurants with his tickets? Artistic connection with your audiences and customer service are integral parts of how people view your brand. Again, what can they count on you to do or deliver?

What makes for a “great idea?” Interbrand, an international branding company headquartered in New York, says that a great brand is inspirational and aspirational. It captures an idea that reinforces your patron’s perceptions of what is unique about what you do and what is of value to them. Furthermore, great brands meet four criteria:

- ❖ They are differentiated and hold a standard for unique value propositions that stand out from the competition.
- ❖ They are relevant to the needs of the consumer by satisfying both emotional and functional needs.
- ❖ They are credible and accepted by audiences because audiences can see your ability to deliver on the promise.
- ❖ They can stretch and grow to meet the long-term needs of the organization.

Brand Environment: Building on the Patron's Experiences

Interbrand believes that brand experiences build from one to the next as part of a continuous chain. Brand environments are critical to the perceptions of a brand, and your company’s long-term commitment and consistency are keys to success. Interbrand suggests that brands are managed for value along an escalating line. (See chart below.)



Every patron encounters a chain of experiences. It often starts with word-of-mouth or critical review about one of your productions, your organization or both; something somebody says sticks in another person’s mind. It can be enthusiastic support or a negative comment. Those words become part of a

single brand experience for the person who heard the comment. It becomes an impression that can be positively reinforced or repositioned (in the case of an unfavorable statement) through advertising, public relations, literature, critical reviews and community outreach.

As the consumer encounters other brand experiences, a set of values and expectations begin to form. The name of the company sends signals through its logo and advertising, and those, in turn, establish a foundation upon which to build other brand experiences. Calling a ticketing service is often the next encounter, along with the price of the ticket. All of this happens before the customer ever enters your door. What's next? Getting into the car, finding a route, parking, will call, ushers, program magazine, refreshments, lobby displays, seats, comfort, air conditioning, the person in the next seat, the lights go down and it's dark. The show hasn't even started and already a huge set of brand experiences have occurred.

You must be aware that subscribers and donors have a very different set of values (derived from a huge number of brand experiences) than the newbie. Understandable. Loyalists know the route to your theatre and don't worry so much about the hassles of "getting there." They have a much stronger attachment to the "mission." The brand then stands for the range of adventurous theatrical experiences these people have taken with you.

Occasional buyers are often picky and choosy because they want to be. They recognize your brand and may value their experiences with you as much as the loyalists, but they like to be less committed. Therefore, the brand must be a constant reminder that you are relevant in their lives.

Newbies and testers will put up the most hassles because issues like "getting there," must be learned, and fear of the unknown is a constant reminder of other bad experiences. A brand image can help to cut through the clutter for most newbies, and that image is reinforced through services the newbie can count on, like a word-of-mouth experience, plus more information (from a well-designed website), friendly ticketing, maps to the theatre, easy parking, etc. If your audience attendance numbers are like the numbers at Mark Taper Forum, in Los Angeles, where newbies and testers represent between eight and thirty percent of the audience at every performance; their first impressions (and your follow-up) are critical if you want to break through the "been there, done that" syndrome, gain repeat patronage and enhance the impressions surrounding your brand.

Research: Uncovering Key Elements for Establishing a Brand Platform

The key to establishing a platform on which to build a brand is **research**, both internal and external. Understanding what people know, or don't know, and how they perceive the value of your company in their lives is essential. Interviewing stakeholders, conducting focus groups, compiling past and current qualitative research and assessing your competition's brand image are vitally important. This discovery phase should also uncover potential emotional links, or points of relevance, that connect you with each of your key audiences. It is at this point that a "personality" of your company begins to emerge.

Research can reveal problems that will affect the brand if not corrected or repositioned. Word-of-mouth might suggest you consistently have hot shows, but your theatre is located in a less-than-desirable neighborhood. Would people feel more comfortable knowing the area is friendly with a host of great funky restaurants nearby? On the other hand, if you are known for taking big risks, the slightly dangerous image of your location might be an asset to your brand for certain people. Be prepared to deal with both the positive and detractive opinions; learn to reposition how opinions are perceived and transform the detractive ones to your advantage.

Only after the research is compiled can you begin to think adequately about the framework around which you build a "brand platform." It is, in the simplest terms, a blueprint that everyone in your organization agrees is used for decision-making and ensuring consistency.

Interbrand suggests that the platform contain a series of statements about the organization's

- ❖ **Vision, or reason for being.** How will this aspirational philosophy behind the brand make a difference in the patron's mind? This brand vision can co-exist with your organization's mission and artistic vision, provided the brand vision is easily accessible to and understood by the wide variety of patrons in the relationships you have established.
- ❖ **Mission.** The challenge for the brand and the role it is to play in moving toward the vision.
- ❖ **Values.** Key attributes that define the brand in the minds of the patron.
- ❖ **Position.** That wonderful place your brand will own in the minds of the customer, the promises and commitments by which the brand should be known.

Brand Expression: It's Time to Start Thinking About a Logo

After you have conducted and compiled your research and the findings are understood and supported by your entire organization, and after you've detailed the framework around a brand platform, it's time to draft a "brand expression" — a document articulating how the brand will be represented across all of the devices and initiatives used to promote your company. Designers will better understand the message that the logo and graphic look need to convey in all forms of advertising. Communications staff should have a clear set of key messages to support and reinforce the brand image constantly and consistently. Customer services staff, often the only personal contact with patrons purchasing tickets or being ushered to their seats, must be trained to support the vision, mission and values your organization wants to maintain in the customer's mind.

Seeking out people in your community who can advise and support the development of a brand platform can be helpful. Especially if your organization is small, and the staff is overwhelmed with other activities. Taking the time to compile the research sufficiently, craft a brand platform and subsequent

SIDEBAR: The “Branding” of Centre Stage — South Carolina! in Greenville

BY CLAUDE W. BLAKELY

The 2002–2003 season of Centre Stage — South Carolina! (CSSC!) will mark its twentieth anniversary. Until 2000, CSSC! had never given much thought to the concept of “branding.” A friend of the theatre, Brad Majors, was called in to assist us with our marketing for the theatre’s new location. The first question asked by Brad was how did CSSC! want to be branded by its patrons and by the community? Brad suggested that we identify a brief (possibly even one word) byline and a tagline that would communicate to our patrons that desired first impression.

Since the name Centre Stage — South Carolina! does not identify what the organization does, we began to brainstorm on this issue. Our mission statement proclaims that we “will specialize in current play releases and classics of contemporary drama, comedy and musicals, with emphasis on Obie/Tony Award and Pulitzer Prize winners.”

After many suggestions and much discussion, we settled on the byline, “Theatre — It’s What We Do...” and the tagline, “Bringing the Best in Stage Works to the Center of Greenville.” Brad really wanted us to be more specific in our byline choice. He felt that “Theatre — It’s What We Do...” did not brand our theatrical focus strongly enough. He felt this to be too general and too broad to identify Centre Stage uniquely.

Our venue is intimate, and our productions are frequently scheduled while the plays are still running on Broadway and off-Broadway. In the end, however, we did stay with this choice. We wanted to convey that we present the full gamut of theatrical offerings. The preliminary discussions were with our marketing committee and executive staff. The final decision was made by our executive and artistic director and was approved by the full board of directors.

Our meeting with Brad considerably changed our marketing strategies. The byline and the tagline are now incorporated into all of our print and media materials. They appear on our letterhead, our envelopes, our newsletters, our brochures, our press releases and on all promotions that are distributed.

Our patrons, newcomers to the theatre, the media and the general public have responded quite favorably to our new approach. Over the years, we had been mistaken for a restaurant, a theatrical supply company, a box office service for all venues in the area and a booking agent. That no longer happens.

— *Claude W. Blakely is administrative director of Centre Stage — South Carolina! (www.CentreStage.org) in Greenville. He can be reached by email at claudе.blakely@centrestage.org.*

expression can be a daunting task. An advertising professional, someone who has the experience of developing a brand for a small business, could be solicited for the board of directors, or a board committee, specifically to work on brand development. (See the accompanying article on Pittsburgh’s City Theatre.)

Your company has a brand — simply because your organization exists. Your patrons have continuing brand experiences — the images and values about that existing brand. Are those brand images and values working for you and your customers? Which would you like to change over time?

When I think back to those Nike sneakers I recently bought, how did Nike manage to make me believe I could have

comfortable shoes and help me be a better runner? Those shoes have no emotional connection for me, but maybe I can achieve a “personal best” with them. Running, however, is a singular experience. Theatre is an engaging experience enjoyed by a large group, including actors, stagehands and audience. In a very curious way, it’s easier for a theatre company to cultivate a strong brand relationship with its patrons, because we work with emotional and intellectual ideas that resonate and radiate in a brand environment. By supporting our naturally theatrical attributes with services and communications, we’re in a better position to assemble all of the ingredients for expressing a great idea and maintaining a wonderful theatrical brand.

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FROM COMMITTEE TO COMMITMENT

PITTSBURGH'S CITY THEATRE INTRODUCES A UNIQUE WAY TO INDIVIDUALIZE BOARD PARTICIPATION

BY MARGIE ROMERO

The board and staff of City Theatre, a 28-year-old company in Pittsburgh with a focus on creating new work, recently completed an intensive three-year strategic plan. One of the issues raised during the planning process was how to engage board members more actively. According to David Jobin, the theatre's managing director for five years, many of the 40-member board had let it be known that committee participation was not the best use of their time.

As members of the Governance Critical Issue Team, Jobin and longtime board member Tom Hollander were assigned the task of studying the problem and coming back to the group with recommendations. "Most people thought we would restructure the committees," Jobin said. What they decided to suggest, however, was far more radical.

The approach Jobin and Hollander designed is called Customized Commitment. It does away with most board committees and instead gives personal assignments to each of the 40 members. The assignments are based on the particular strengths, interests and resources of each individual member.

"In the past, the model was committees and sub-committees," Jobin explained. "Like in most arts organizations, board members were assigned to two mandatory committees. While we tried to connect assignments to the skills of each board member, sometimes that was not possible. In the end, committee participation really just revolved around meetings; every month or so, 10 to 15 people would gather and review what the staff was doing. Board members would certainly give their opinions and suggestions about additional work we could undertake, but as far as that person leaving the meeting with an assignment that was specifically theirs, it didn't happen at City Theatre. On a personal, individual level, no committee member understood exactly what his or her role was. What it led to in our case, and this might not be industry-wide, was a lack of individual responsibility when it came to accomplishing the organizational goals for the year."

Individual responsibility accepted by each board member is what Customized Commitment is all about.

The Match Game

Gone is the Marketing Committee. Gone are the development sub-committees — corporate, foundation and individual. Gone is the committee to organize the annual gala fundraiser.

"We have one person on our board who owns his own marketing firm," Jobin said. "His Customized Commitment is to

advise the marketing team when they need assistance. He is certainly capable of providing that insight and leadership without five or six lay people chiming in. There is no longer a committee which says as a group, 'We contribute this.' Now it's one person. One of the big shifts is it is now very clear who is responsible."

To come up with what duties and roles would be most appropriate for each board member, a three-person staff team got together and made a list of the theatre's needs for the year. They then looked at the 40-member board roster and matched them up. For instance, one City Theatre board member is a vice president of human resources at a major firm in Pittsburgh. Replacing the Personnel Committee, her Customized Commitment is to assist the staff with all human resource issues. In another case, a board member who has great corporate connections has been assigned the task of setting up five meetings with local corporations capable of giving \$10,000 or more.

Not all of City Theatre's Customized Commitments are so high-end. For instance, a young lawyer on the board is organizing a social event that revolves around one of City Theatre's plays for her large law firm. Another board member has taken the responsibility of planning cast dinners to help familiarize out-of-town actors with Pittsburgh. "In the past the staff had taken this task on," Jobin said. "Now there's one individual whose job is to call other board members and arrange these parties."

According to Jobin, where Customized Commitments will help save the staff time, committees actually added to the staff's workload. "We estimate that some staff members spent up to 25% of their time facilitating board committees: preparing agenda materials, attending meetings and preparing minutes after meetings," he said.

One to One

Not only is Jobin happy with the concept of Customized Commitments, he's even finding the process of handing them out to be beneficial. An Executive Committee of seven core board members has been retained (the other two committee holdovers are Business & Finance and Nominating) and one member of this group as well as one senior staff member have been meeting individually with each board member to discuss their assignments.

"It's very personal," Jobin said. "We had one meeting over coffee and another at lunch. We go to their office, or into their environment, at their convenience. These meetings have been very productive. Members have brought up ideas that we hadn't thought of. It's a great way to listen to board members. In the

past, they haven't had the opportunity to sit down with a person from the Executive Committee and a staff member and talk about what he or she likes doing for City Theatre. Since the Customized Commitment is good for one year, these meetings will take place every summer."

Ideally, each board member will have assignments that will help generate funds for City Theatre and help widen its audience. "We are also talking to them one to one about their giving level," Jobin said. City Theatre does not have a "give or get" dollar amount. "We don't have that because it's important for us to diversify our board, primarily in terms of age. We have people who can give at a \$250 level and people who can give at a \$250,000 level," Jobin said.

Commitments to the Future

Generating both enthusiasm and funds for City Theatre is very important to artistic director Tracy Brigden, who is beginning her second season with the company. There are many objectives she would like to accomplish in the next few years, and she believes the board's embrace of Customized Commitments will help her to expedite these plans.

"One of the long-term goals is an assessment and refurbishment of the theatre," Brigden said. "One particular board member has vast knowledge of urban planning and development. Her Customized Commitment will be to assist with the renovation planning process. Through Customized Commitments we will also tap another member who has a great deal of experience with capital campaigns." Acquiring a new building for actor housing is an additional component of City

Theatre's three-year strategic plan, and it will be the Customized Commitment of yet another board member with real estate expertise to advise.

Raising awareness about the process of developing new plays is another objective Brigden is eager to advance. "In the individual meetings about Customized Commitments, we are asking the board members to become involved and give support to the commissioning of new plays," Brigden said. "It is a real pleasure for me to sit down and talk with each of them about this subject, and it's exciting to hear their ideas."

As City Theatre board president, Dee Jay Oshry also anticipates a new level of excitement. "Our board has always taken an active role in the life of the theatre," he said. "Through these Customized Commitments, that role becomes even more active, because each board member will now help shape his or her own relationship to the theatre for the coming year."

The approach is also applauded outside of the City Theatre organization. "Customized Commitment is an extremely creative way for City Theatre to enhance and personalize board members' experience," said Bonnie J. Rack-Wilder, chief executive officer of Akoya, the firm that led City Theatre through its recent strategic planning initiative. "A lot of nonprofit organizations have very generic expectations of their boards. Customized Commitment is a way to allow every board member to work on the things that most interest them, the things they enjoy most. This way, City Theatre gets a whole range of ways that board members can contribute to its welfare, and ensures that board members will follow through on their commitments, because they chose them themselves," she said. "I think it's a wonderful idea."

— Margie Romero is the media relations assistant at City Theatre Company (www.CityTheatreCompany.org) in Pittsburgh. She can be reached by email at mromero@citytheatrecompany.org.