

Strategic Planning in the Arts: A Practical Guide

Focused Marketing

A focused marketing effort can add significantly to an arts organization's fund-raising capability in a short period of time with limited resources. Any successful focused marketing effort is centered on a realistic list of targets—people of means, corporate and foundation executives, opinion leaders and politicians—who can positively impact the organization's ability to achieve its mission.

Arts administrators frequently allude to the relationship between marketing and development. Indeed, the impact of increased visibility on fund-raising is so great that some organizations have one senior executive managing both activities. Yet the cost of building visibility can be high and the likely contributions generated by a classic visibility strategy are low. Advertising agencies have learned in the for-profit sector that *targeted* marketing strategies are essential for building *profitable* visibility at a reasonable cost.

The same concept applies in the arts. Targeting donors of major potential is a far more effective way of using visibility to build fund-raising than simply mounting a major public relations and advertising campaign.

This does not mean that broad-based, traditional public relations efforts are not important. Coverage by major newspapers, national magazines, and television and radio stations endorses an arts organization; it is a meaningful method for building credibility with both donors and ticket buyers. This coverage can also help achieve the mission of an arts institution that aims to reach a broad spectrum of the population.

Yet to add significantly to a fund-raising base in a short period of time with limited resources, a "focused marketing" effort is advisable. In focused marketing, the specific targets for the campaign are pre-selected. A list of potentially helpful individuals is compiled and a systematic approach to engaging these individuals is pursued.

Development professionals will call this approach "cultivation" and claim they have been doing this for years. But focused marketing is *organized, on-going* cultivation in a way that few arts organizations have pursued their donor prospects. Most organizations will cultivate major donors by inviting them to an event or two. If they do not respond in a limited period of time, the cultivation is typically abandoned and the next prospect is approached.

Focused marketing assumes that there are individuals whose financial means, access to resources or influence are so great that they should not be written off. For some organizations there are fifty such people, for others there are five hundred who should ultimately support the organization. This is a particularly important technique in smaller markets where there are only a relatively few, identifiable people with the resources and the interest to support the arts in a meaningful way.

The first step in creating a focused marketing effort is to develop a list of targets. These should be people of means, corporate and foundation executives, opinion leaders and politicians.

Creating a list is a simple matter of collecting names from one's Board members, staff and peer organizations' donor lists. Each organization must decide how many prospects it can properly service. There is no point to initiating a focused marketing effort that lapses in three months owing to an over-loaded staff. The initial list of prospects should be long enough to have an impact while short enough to be manageable. Clearly, preference should be given to those individuals known personally to the Board and staff. As the focused marketing campaign is successful, additional prospects can always be added.

Prospects should also be limited to those who may realistically support the organization. Institutions in the top tier of the region's arts organizations should be aiming at the highest level of community leadership. Smaller organizations in bigger cities will probably not have a great deal of success cultivating a random list of the region's elite. The prospects need never know that they have been targeted in this manner. In fact, most will only become subtly aware that they are more involved in the activities of the organization.

The goal, of course, is to encourage people to become more involved with the organization, as a donor, ticket purchaser or even Board member. To build involvement means that one has to do more than just send a series of newsletters and other mailings. These will invariably go unread unless they are connected to events that are more engaging. There are a number of more sophisticated cultivation tools available.

For example, invitations to a back stage tour or to the installation of a major exhibition can be very enticing. Most people appreciate unusual experiences. Bringing a prospective donor to a rehearsal can be more exciting than inviting them to a public performance.

A dinner or cocktail reception is an ideal forum for educating prospects about an organization. These need not be "hard sell" fund-raising events but rather enjoyable activities that introduce the prospects to other supporters of the organization. Inviting one or more celebrities (from the corporate, political, entertainment or arts world) will only help to encourage participation.

Remember, however, that one is hoping to find those individuals who will be interested in providing substantial support for the organization; this will usually only be successful if the art matters to the prospects on some level. For this reason, these social events should be linked to a performance, exhibition, lecture or other program.

Since most arts organizations do more than produce exhibitions and performances, one has the opportunity to interest those individuals who may care more about education and outreach than about art. Bringing prospective supporters to school programs, community outreach events or other social service programming can often attract individuals who might not otherwise have an interest.

These prospects should also receive systematic mailings of newsletters, articles and reviews. Upcoming programming should be marketed with special attention given to major events. The goal of this consistent infusion of information is to create the feeling that the organization is incredibly productive, successful and important.

For the best prospects, a Board or staff member should be assigned to monitor the relationship and to coordinate all contact. While the majority of the work of focused marketing will typically

fall on the staff, in very small organizations, Board members should be asked to manage the entire process. Controlling the level of effort is best accomplished by developing an annual focused marketing calendar prior to the beginning of the season. The calendar would include performances or exhibitions (at least one per quarter), major mailings, educational activities and social events that will be used to cultivate the prospect list. Care should be taken to ensure that the sum of the events reflects accurately the scope of the organization.

If these activities are supported by a successful, traditional public relations effort in the major media, they have an even greater chance of being effective. Many prospects will eventually offer financial contributions, introductions to other donors, and to serve as volunteers or Board members.

A tracking system should be developed. Note the number of responses, the type of events that seem to be of major interest, and the Board or staff members who have made contact.

Over time, a profile of key interests and contacts will emerge. This information can only help in strengthening future fund-raising solicitations.

Prospects who show absolutely no interest in any activities over an entire season can be removed from the list. But do not remove a prospect too quickly; someone may not show personal interest but may have the power to affect corporate, foundation or government grants. Your campaign to involve that person may be working without your even knowing it!

Pursuing a successful focused marketing campaign requires strong coordination of the marketing and development departments. Typically, the development department will take responsibility for the activity. The marketing department must provide many of the materials and much of the information that will be provided to the prospects.

Pursued properly and in an organized fashion, focused marketing can have a major impact on the fiscal health of an organization without a significant investment of scarce resources.

FOCUSED MARKETING PLANNING ISSUES

Each of the following issues should be addressed in the focused marketing plan:

- Has the organization pursued an on-going effort to reach major potential donors?
- Is the organization's focused marketing campaign organized and consistent?
- Has the organization developed a list of solicitation targets?
- How many prospects can the organization effectively service?
- Are Board members actively involved in this effort?
- Which events would be effective for cultivation?

- Has a system been developed for tracking each prospect?
- Does the organization maintain a profile on each prospect's key interests and contacts?