

L.A. THEATRE PASS

Analysis of 1987 Campaign

Recommendations for 1988 Campaign

Background

The L.A. Theatre Pass is the first group subscription plan in Los Angeles. Each L.A. Theatre Pass is a book of five coupons; each coupon is an admission to each of the five member theatres, good for an entire year to any production, any performance. The key idea behind the pass is to make it simple for subscribers to use, with no fine print restrictions--- coupon holders have total flexibility, and may attend any night of the week for one price. Each passbook will be sold for \$55, or only \$11 a ticket. The passbooks will be a real theatre bargain.

Many theatre-goers, reluctant to try smaller theatres, are able to sample five small theatre companies, who collectively have a good recognition factor because of the high quality of their work. The participating theatres, the Back Alley Theatre, Actors for Themselves at the Matrix, Stages, L.A. Theatre Works, and the Odyssey Theatre Ensemble are considered the best professional small theatres presently operating in Los Angeles County and are consistently responsible for the majority of critically recognized productions in any given year. These theatre are also geographically diverse: locations include Van Nuys, Hollywood, Santa Monica, and Venice.

The 1987 L.A. Theatre Pass campaign targeted three distinct populations:

* Theatre-goers who have tried one of the member theatres, but not others. The consortium subscription reaches into marketing areas untapped by any of the participating theatres individually.

Evaluation: This group has been reached very successfully; the largest number of new subscribers came from the participating theatres' mailing lists.

* Theatre-goers who have only attended large theatres (i.e. the Mark Taper Forum or the Ahmanson). Many theatre patrons, disillusioned with large theatre experiences because of price, lack of intimacy, or lack of theatrical electricity that is often associated with productions of new work, want to test out smaller theatre alternatives. The L.A. Theatre Pass packages the best small theatres for them to sample.

Evaluation: This group was reached with moderate success. Purchasing lists from larger theatres was expensive, and cost per subscriber was

high. The large newspaper ads were more cost effective in reaching this group.

* Movie-goers not currently attending live theater. Movie-goers often do not realize that live theatre can be a viable economic alternative to going to films. They think that all theatre tickets cost \$40 or more, and are not aware of competitive neighborhood live theatre prices.

Evaluation: Movie-goers were not successfully converted to live theatre. However, campaign tactics were not specially tailored for this group. If this group is not deleted from targeted populations in 1988, a substantially more aggressive campaign in movie theatres most be conceived, utilizing ads in movie theatres' in-house newsletters and print ads placed in the movie sections of newspapers.

Number of subscriptions 1987 (actual): 2,348
Number of subscriptions 1988 (projected): 2,800

Recommendations

The 1988 campaign should be multi-faceted, utilizing the following strategies (also utilized in the 1987 campaign and listed in order of importance to that campaign):

- * Renewal letters (three)
- * Direct mail to all participating theatres' mailing lists. The proposed slogan is "One Year of Great Theatre for the Price of One Seat!"
- * Print ads (including a full page ad in the L.A. Times Sunday Calendar Section).
- * Direct sales (curtain speeches, program stuffers)
- * Telemarketing (to follow up on renewals only)

New strategies incorporated into 1988 campaign:

- * Subscription parties given by current L.A. Theatre Passholders.
- * Creation of a quality video Public Service Announcement to be aired on television and utilizing name actors. The following actors have agreed to participate: Ian McShane, John Schuck, Marian Mercer, Barbara Bain, and Larry Pressman.

Problem:

Renewal rate was only 58%. The major reason cited by subscribers for non-renewals was lack of attendance. If subscribers had not redeemed at least three of the five coupons for tickets during the year, they did not resubscribe. While some subscribers loved the complete flexibility of the Pass, others found

it hard to motivate themselves to pick up the phone and make the reservations, given the large amount of choice. These subscribers will probably be better off with a more standard subscription format, which dictates nights of attendance.

Recommendations:

Attendance can probably be improved by augmenting the newsletter, now being issued every other month, by a flashcard reminder of events playing on the alternate months.

Two graduate students in UCLA's Arts Management Program, Eric Bernhard and Debra Steckel, have offered their services to execute a qualitative market research project probing attitudes of subscribers who have only used their passes one or two times by the half-way point of the coming year. This study should uncover additional ways to help subscribers utilize their passes more fully.

Problem:

Audiences all over Los Angeles are "greying." This older population is placing pressure on the theatres to produce artistically more conventional work. This is an on-going national problem.

Recommendation:

A pilot Student Pass campaign should be initiated targeting UCLA, USC, Cal State Northridge, and Cal Arts. The Pass should be offered to students at \$35, or \$7/ticket, keeping it competitive with first-run movies. The flexibility and price of the pass, and the geographical diversity of the theatres should be very attractive to students. Individual theatres have expressed great difficulty in activating students to attend live theatre in Los Angeles. The Student Pass could be an ideal pilot program to test an optimum subscription package. Funding proposals should be developed for the N/S/L Partnership and the Cultural Affairs Department [these \$2,500 and \$10,000 proposals, respectively, were in fact funded].

Strategies specific to student Campaign:

- * New graphics and slogan developed targeted for younger audiences
- * Ads in student newspapers
- * Campus representatives recruited. The incentive would be a free subscription for every nine sold.

Additional Recommendations:

A zip code analysis of subscribers suggests that the eastern portion of the San Fernando Valley has not been saturated as fully as other portions of the county. A specific mailing to zip codes in and around 91607 should be budgeted.

Cooperation Among the Theatres:

This project, while providing an important source of revenue for member theatres, has had many non-monetary returns as well. Through sharing resources and ideas, each theatre has grown individually during the past two years. The Los Angeles theatre community, once considered divisive, has demonstrated that it can work cooperatively toward a common goal. Each of the theatres pitched in with their personnel to execute their part of the initial plan. The Back Alley ordered the actual tickets, designed the order forms, and mailed press releases. Stages held the press conference in their outdoor stage area and handled the central telephone line. L.A. Theatre Works lined up a pro bono advertising agency and provided the Olympic Arts Festival mailing list. The Odyssey oversaw the design and implementation of the direct mail brochure. The Matrix provided a staff person to fill orders during the initial phase of the campaign.

Albert Idhe, who functioned last year as staff representative for the Odyssey, has been hired by the consortium to become its first full-time staff person to oversee the execution of a more intricate campaign this year, as well as production of the newsletter and flashcard.

Intangible Benefits:

The unique aspects of this project have generated a high level of publicity for the participating theatres, separating in the public's mind serious, on-going producing entities from theatres that exist primarily as actors' showcases.

Consortium meetings, which were held at least once a month, and more often during the spring campaign, were hard to keep focused and brief for good reasons. Once these administrative heads of theatres started comparing notes, discussions ranged into interesting side-lines, from box office accounting problems to board composition. These meetings made all five theatres closer and less competitive. Administrative heads of theatre heads reported rooting for each other's productions to succeed. It became easy to pick up the phone and reach one of the other theatres for suggestions for designers or technical staff. L.A. Theatre Works and the Back Alley co-produced for the first time (DANNY AND THE DEEP BLUE SEA), and the Back Alley arranged to borrow rehearsal space and lighting equipment from other theatres. There are a host of intangible benefits in not feeling artistically isolated.

Discussions of artistic needs inevitably lead to discussions of possible solutions, and the Consortium's potential for further cooperative ventures is great. Among other projects, we have discussed creating a master joint theatre mailing list, owning a truck jointly, and an advertising campaign which would impact on the Los Angeles tourist market.

This project continues to be vitally important to the overall health of theatre in Los Angeles.