

Subj: Re: theater marketing
Date: 05/01/2001 1:52:11 PM Eastern Daylight Time
From: COLLINCR@pg.cc.md.us (CHERYL COLLINS)
To: Ragwrite@aol.com

Bob,

I finally got the chance to sit down and read the whole report over spring break. It was spectacular! And really exactly what I needed, a battle plan as opposed to a report. I've already started implementing some of your suggestions. For instance, I had the cast members of my latest show Spunk to bring in names and addresses of everyone they wanted a flyer sent to. I picked more than a hundred new names for my mailing list this way. I was all set to start slicing subscribers for next season until I read how you compared subscriptions to memberships with the member having the responsibility to make contact...boom! we are now soliciting memberships at \$40 to receive 1/3 off of two tickets for the next two seasons. The become a METSETTER line will appear in the programs for this run. I've had volunteers going to the shopping centers and churches in the area to distribute flyers and we are taking advantage of all the free pr (community calendars and the like) as we can.

All in all, your contribution to our cause has been outstanding and I wish to express my deep appreciation for your time and effort.

I hope you don't mind me continuing to contact you from time to time as we put more of the plan into place.

Sincerely,

Cheryl Collins

----- Headers -----

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 Received from mail.pg.cc.md.us ([64.242.13.70]) by rly-za01.mx.aol.com (v77_r1.36) with ESMTTP; Tue, 01 May 2001 13:52:06 2000
 Received from PGCC-Message_Server by mail.pg.cc.md.us with Novell_GroupWise; Tue, 01 May 2001 13:56:38 -0400
 Message-Id: <saee096.079@mail.pg.cc.md.us>
 X-Mailer: Novell GroupWise Internet Agent 5.5.4.1
 Date: Tue, 01 May 2001 13:56:15 -0400
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 Subject: Re: theater marketing
 Mime-Version: 1.0
 Content-Type: text/plain; charset=US-ASCII
 Content-Transfer-Encoding: quoted-printable
 Content-Disposition: inline

Marketing the MET

First draft, 3/8/01

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MET Marketing Outline

Revised 3/8/01

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INTRODUCTION

Plan Objectives

This marketing plan will provide a framework for introducing the MET to the surrounding community, establishing strategic partnerships, increasing audience numbers, facilitating administrative tasks, and securing long-term community interest in, and support for, the MET. While specific marketing demographics have been included, this should not be considered a static bible from which great things will spring based solely on the information presented. Markets are dynamic and information is constantly changing. Perhaps there is no greater evidence of this than Prince George's County, which has undergone an incredible social and economic metamorphosis in the last decade. Rest assured, the transformation is hardly complete.

Plan Rationale

There are numerous good texts on marketing the arts. This is not intended to be like any of those. Given the start-up nature of the MET in Prince George's County, and the immediacy with which the MET needs to succeed, this is more of a crisis battle plan than a board room strategy. Considering the MET's current parameters of little money, few resources, and an unaware public, the fight to gain recognition, respect and customers has to start right in the trenches. This plan condenses the objectives, goals, mission and needs of the MET into four basic areas of action: Cultivation, Administration, Support, and Promotion. Everything that is essential to getting the MET in front of the public will fall into at least one of these areas.

Background

History of the MET

Founded in 1988, the Metropolitan Ebony Theatre (MET) was formed to tell a breadth of stories from the African American experience. Its goal is to provide more working opportunities for theater artists and technicians of color. Ultimately, the MET will offer training and provide a nurturing environment to develop new talent in all areas of the theater field.

The MET started to produce plays professionally in February of 1989, with George C. Wolfe's *The Colored Museum*. This production was significant because the play dealt with black stereotypes and their often toxic effects — a subject that went to the core of why the MET was started in the first place. The production received rave reviews from local press and played to sold-out houses all three weeks of its run. The play was brought back by popular demand in 1990.

Also in 1989, the company had successful runs with the Broadway musical *Don't Bother Me I Can't Cope* and the historical drama *Do Lord Remember Me*, James DeJongh's story based on WPA interviews conducted with ex-slaves in the 1930s. The spring 1990 production of August Wilson's *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* capped the first exciting season for the MET.

After getting off to such a great start, MET founder and artistic director Cheryl Collins decided to formally organize the MET, and to hone her skills as an artistic director. With help from the Center for Management Assistance, the MET organized a board, incorporated, and received federal "501c3" not-for-profit status in March of 1991. During the incorporation process, Collins enrolled in the professional directors' program at the University of Missouri at Kansas City. In May, 1994 she received a Master of Fine Arts in professional directing.

While a full time student at Missouri, Collins continued to produce and direct plays for the MET. In 1992 the company conducted a local playwright competition and produced the three plays that emerged as winners: *Knowledge or What?* by Latisha Hinton; *Am I Dying Secretly* by Henry Livingston, and *If She Only Knew* by Vincent Alexander.

Collins also directed student productions of Athol Fugard's *My Children, My Africa* in 1992, and Charles Fuller's *Zooman and the Sign*. The latter production focused on how gang violence affects a neighborhood, and featured a former gang member in the title role. The drama was used as a tool to promote discussions with at-risk youth in the community.

After graduating from UMKC, Collins moved herself and the MET to Prince George's County, Maryland. In 1998 she found a new home for the MET at Prince George's Community College in Largo, Md. The first production of the reorganized company was *Flyin' West* by Pearl Cleage. The play was produced with a small endowment from the college, and the college's theater department provided substantial technical support in all facets of production. The MET was also supported by the Prince George's County Arts Council, which helped defray marketing costs. The show ran for 16 performances over three weekends. It received 14 standing ovations, was seen by over 1,100 theater-goers, and earned back most of its original endowment.

Theater and arts in Prince George's County

Harmony Hall

This exciting facility in a converted elementary school houses a wide variety of activities and community interests. The regional center serves as a community center, with recreation classes and events geared toward children, teens, adults, and seniors. The Arts portion of the facility provides a variety of fine arts programs, including classes in the visual arts, theater, music and dance. The John Addison Concert Hall and galleries offer music, dance, and dramatic programs and exhibitions. Natural resources are also highlighted at the center, with classes and exhibit space available for those whose interests lie in the outdoors. In addition, administrative offices for the M-NCPPC Southern Area operations staff are housed here.

Montpelier

Montpelier Cultural Arts Center, located on the grounds of the historic Montpelier Mansion in Laurel, is Prince George's County's premier multifaceted arts facility. The Art Center occupies a renovated barn which houses three galleries. The Library Gallery exhibits one person and group shows which are selected through an open competition by an outside juror. The Main Gallery is used for invitational exhibitions and juried competition. Work by artists of regional and national acclaim is featured. The Main Gallery may be rented by the public for meetings, receptions, and performances. The Resident Artists' Gallery features artists who have studios at the Art Center. Various styles are represented, including prints, sculpture, and ceramics. Studios are open to the public, and offer insight into the process of creating artwork. Classes and workshops in the visual and literary arts are offered at this facility; cultural events in both the visual and performing arts are also featured regularly.

Publick Playhouse

The Publick Playhouse is committed to making the arts a vital element of the community. Cultural diversity is the hallmark of this theater's success, attracting audiences from the greater Washington metropolitan area for jazz and gospel to modern dance, from musical theater to historic drama. The Playhouse also presents educational theater for all ages, and is equipped as a rental facility for community organizations. One of the area's most inviting performance spaces, the Playhouse is located less than half a mile off the Baltimore-Washington Parkway, and just 10 minutes from Capitol Hill. The Playhouse began life as the Cheverly Theatre in 1947. With ornate sky scenes on the ceiling and a plush art deco interior, the theater was a success throughout the 1950s. But competition from television and newer cinemas led to its eventual decline and abandonment. A group of supporters joined the M-NCPPC in 1975 to purchase and renovate the old theater, which reopened exactly 30 years after the gala opening of the Cheverly Theatre. Improvements continue to be made today. Seating is general admission; box office hours are Monday through Friday from 10am - 4pm, and one hour before each performance. The Playhouse is accessible to individuals with mobility impairments. Sign interpreted and audio described performances are available with one month's prior notice; infrared assistive listening devices are available on a first-come, first-served basis. Free car and bus parking is located on well-lighted lots to the rear and east of the Playhouse.

Prince George's Stadium

Resulting from a successful public-private partnership, Prince George's Stadium is located just south of the Rts. 301 and 50 interchange, at Green Branch Community Park. Prince George's Stadium is home to the Bowie Baysox, Class AA affiliate of the Baltimore Orioles. The

franchise has developed a number of successful ballplayers who have moved on to play in the major leagues. This minor league baseball stadium is the result of a cooperative venture between Maryland Baseball Limited Partnership and The Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission. The stadium includes a lighted playing field, dugouts, locker rooms, 8,000 box and general admission seats, club seats, 9 skyboxes, a grass overflow area for 2,000 spectators, the concourse, concession stands, souvenir shops, ticket offices, administrative offices, a restaurant, a carousel, group picnic areas, a children's play area, and parking lots. Entertainment, fireworks, good food, frequent giveaways, and a family-oriented environment have made the stadium and the Baysox a big hit with the public. What better place to have your glove signed by the next generation of major league stars? The stadium and parking lot are available for public rental for activities that have included baseball games, a ham radio show, new car shows, birthday parties, special events in the Diamond View Restaurant, and concerts. The Diamond View Restaurant and the Pavilion Picnic Areas are available for rentals through the Baysox on game nights.

Prince George's Little Theater

PGLT is Prince George's oldest continually active community theatre group, performing continuously since 1960. Volunteer members provide all on stage, backstage, technical and business services for each production.

National Ballet Company – Bowie

The Ballet Academy - Beltsville

The Ballet Academy opened in 1981 under the direction of Alison Miller. The academy teaches the foundations of Classical Ballet based on the Royal Academy and Vaganova syllabi with emphasis on placement, technique, and musicality.

Classes in Repertory/Variations, Stretch and Tone, and Jazz are also offered. Level determination is based on prior training, age and level of muscular development and coordination. Exceptions may be made at the Director/Instructor's discretion.

Identification of marketing areas

Primary

The MET is located in the geographic center of Prince George's County, making it fairly accessible from all points within county boundaries. Because of the county's favorable social and economic makeup as one of the most affluent majority-black counties in the nation, it makes sense to use county boundaries to geographically define the MET's primary target for both cultivation and support. The county's dominant population already reflects many of the social, economic, and cultural characteristics of the MET's preferred adult patron; that is, African-American, professional, age 25-44, homeowner with a moderately large disposable income.

Secondary

Though supported by and geared toward the immediate primary community, the MET cannot ultimately ignore the Baltimore-Washington corridor that is gradually melting the suburban business and residential components of these two large cities together. The MET should concentrate on this corridor again for both cultivation and support, and place strong emphasis on establishing working relationships with the many theater companies and arts organizations. Geographically, this community should be defined as Washington and Baltimore proper, and the businesses and communities along the major highways linking the two cities, specifically, I-95, I-295, and US-1.

CULTIVATION

This section seeks to offer concise examples of cultivation strategies that will broadcast your need to sell tickets across the widest possible audience with a minimum amount of effort and resource expenditure on your part. This is not about refined marketing strategies and careful analysis. It's about a need to fill seats with little or no cash outlay.

Remember that for purposes of this document "cultivation" is not the same as promotion. Promotion seeks to sell the theatre company; cultivation seeks to sell the seats, although each strategy may occasionally borrow parts from the other.

You'll notice that this document is not formatted by topic or keyword, it is formatted by purpose. Therefore, many of the topics appear in more than one place in this document. For example, while you will see a reference to "schools" under Cultivation, it is for a different purpose than the schools entry in the Support chapter. In essence, this entire document remains in a segmented, outline format, with details and explanations added where necessary. The idea is to get the user thinking about the segregation of audience and marketing purpose. It requires a great deal of discipline to talk about the MET at a local civic group meeting and refrain from pushing tickets when you need to fill seats. But your actions and attitude can be the difference between selling a seat for the weekend and selling the organization for the year. Know your purpose with each of the four marketing areas in this document and stick to it. If you build credibility, they will come.

That said, your purpose in this section is to sell tickets. The simple approach outlined here may not be the best route to filling the most seats. It is, however, a good foundation for selling tickets *in the most efficient manner possible, given your limited resources and relative newness to the area.*

Since the MET is fairly new to the area (and the concept of local live theater is relatively unsupported in the county), you might feel the need to blanket the surrounding community with special discounts and promotions. After all, discounts are what get people in the door, right? Well, maybe. In reality, you should resist this temptation. The more offers you make available, the more administrative work you will have, and the harder it will be to keep track of everything and provide top-notch customer service. Plus, people get conditioned quite easily when they're getting their way. Offer a 50 percent discount for one show, then offer free dinner and door prizes with the next, and you'll have folks marking their calendars and expecting an equally good offer every time. Unfortunately, such a commitment is to themselves and not to the theatre company.

So all seats are not going to be filled all the time. This is certainly no surprise. What may be a surprise is the notion that filling every seat should not be a goal of the MET, at least not in the short term. To put the effort into ticket sales necessary to fill a house night after night would not only be impractical, it would be foolish even if the resources were available to do so. Why? Because a budding theatre needs support – financial, moral, political, artistic, critical support. Bodies in seats might help get this. But 200 well connected, well-versed and sufficiently involved patrons are a much better house than 800 walk-ons who have nothing better to do that night. Those 200 will tell their friends, will pull strings, will connect you with others and, if treated well, will come back again. With patience, you'll have a house full of supporters, not just patrons.

Your goal in the early stages of cultivation is to stay as close as possible to one good, solid offer. It will greatly simplify your administrative headaches (there will be enough of those in time), it will be easy to understand for all who come in contact with it (this includes your staff and volunteers), and most importantly it will help with your credibility. You don't want to start marketing life being known as the discount theatre group that will wheel and deal with anyone to sell a ticket. Accept that you'll have to suffer some short-term financial loss for the long-term reputation gain. It will be worth it.

Remember that most people in your primary target have never even heard of the Metropolitan Ebony Theatre, so offering a huge discount and a world of amenities might not be any more effective than simply *introducing* the theatre company. Besides, theatre and most forms of entertainment work more like Wall Street than WalMart. In WalMart you mark merchandise DOWN to move it. On Wall Street, you mark stocks UP to achieve the same result. Investors will grab more for stocks that are rising than those that are falling. So it goes with the arts – a hot production from a hot theatre company can demand full ticket prices – even if patrons received a 50 percent discount last year to help the company find its feet. This doesn't mean you HAVE to charge full price once you become the talk of the town. Just don't be convinced that offering a discount will always draw more patrons to the house.

But this chapter will stress discounting of tickets because there are benefits to offering discounts that go far beyond merely filling seats. It is to your advantage to get acquainted with those benefits – and the strategies necessary to effect them – prior to embarking on any cultivation effort.

Benefits to the MET of discount ticket offers:

- More overall ticket sales – no matter what, you're bound to sell more tickets if people simply know about the offer. If the markdown is good enough, you'll likely entice many in your surrounding area to make the MET their first theater experience.
- More organizational exposure – a price reduction is always a reason to promote, and increased exposure is a natural sales driver as well as a by-product of ticket sales via word-of-mouth advertising.
- Basis for group sales – with discounted tickets, you now have something more enticing to offer groups, businesses, schools and community organizations. You can tailor any discount to any organization if you so choose.
- Resale potential – an offshoot of getting into organizations is that your discounted tickets can be resold by the organizations, thus further increasing your exposure.
- Basis for long-term sales (subscriptions, memberships, season passes) – a discount program is the heart of any long-term offer. You need to reward patrons for their commitment.
- Potential to compare offers – by measuring the results from different campaigns, you can determine which discounts offer the best seating return and the best impact on your bottom line.

Since we're looking to get this organization off the ground, we'll look for strategies that best meet these criteria:

- Simple to initiate and manage
- Can quickly fill seats
- Self-perpetuating
- Self-promoting

Your ticket buyers

Who is your ideal ticket buyer? Before embarking on any sustained cultivation effort, give a little thought to this question. Perhaps this is your ideal demographic...

- Married African American couple
- Homeowners living in Largo area
- Annual household income \$200,000+
- Known arts patrons
- Dedicate two evenings a month for dinner and entertainment outside the home
- Regular contributors to charities and non-profits
- Active in neighborhood affairs and business and civic groups in their area

Could there be a better prospect for a long-term ticket commitment? It would be difficult to find one. Of course, it would be difficult to find enough of these ideal patrons to fill the house time after time. Even if such patrons existed, you would have to get your hands on a contact list with this much detail. Such parochial and explicit information likely does not exist for your primary target area, and the average small theatre organization probably cannot afford to pay for this level of research and analysis. So now you must begin the process of refining your ideal patron, based primarily on known factors about the communities from which you will be drawing.

The next level might look like this: "Married African American homeowners living in central Prince George's County, annual household income \$100,000, regular theatre and movie goers."

Make several of these ideal prospect entries, simplifying each one as you move down the list. Continue to use local demographics and information you obtain from personal and professional contacts. Any library or online database will have the latest Census information, and that will include much of what you need. Your final entry in this list might be something extremely simplistic, like, "Homeowners in central Prince George's County."

The point to this exercise is to have some idea of whom you are pursuing as your individual, long-term ticket buyer. Your mailing lists for these efforts should be a middle ground between ideal patron characteristics and the demographic realities of your primary target area.

The next step is to take your entries and see how they match up to existing databases, or how much it will cost to assemble these different databases. Start from free – libraries, local agencies, business contacts. If you don't find a suitable list there, move on to Internet list services and finally to marketing/research firms. But your best bet as a small arts organization is to stay within your network or community. Ask area volunteers to help create a suitable list. Find out what they know about the neighborhoods and the people who live and work there. Better yet, barter with temp agencies or marketing firms in your target area. Offer tickets or possibly sponsorship recognition in return for good information. See the Promotion and Support sections for more on effective partnerships.

You'll notice that most theater marketing texts put enormous weight on mailings. The strategies here put little emphasis on individual solicitations, and concentrate more on leveraging opportunities such as group sales. In time, you will be in a position to balance your group sales with individual programs and offers. Background and basic strategies for those efforts are included here, but you should certainly defer to more detailed texts for guidance in individual cultivation efforts. The above information is intended to get you thinking NOW about the resources needed to reach individuals with a sustained cultivation effort, and to compare and contrast that strategy with a more impersonal but leverage-oriented group sales approach.

The seating chart

If you don't already have one, spend whatever time and enlist whatever artistic and technical resources are necessary to construct a detailed seating chart. You'll want this chart in hard copy, available for anyone making a sales call, and you'll want it in an electronic format. It's not necessary to have the exact chart available electronically, though this would certainly simplify things. You will need to create and maintain a master spreadsheet of seats that will serve as your DAILY reference for what's filled and what's available for each performance during the season.

Depending on your cultivation efforts, you may need to work several seating charts at the same time. Every person selling seats must know exactly what is available every day, but be certain that you keep only ONE master seating chart and database for each performance, and you update that chart and database daily.

Code your seating spreadsheet so you can separate records by cultivation effort – group sales, season passes, commissioned ticket sales, individual ticket sales, etc. Whatever cultivation strategies you ultimately adopt should be reflected in your seating data. This will help you compare the effectiveness of the different strategies, and will serve as a sales aid if potential patrons want to know who else is attending a show. This could be particularly useful with group sales, as organizations may be more likely to commit if you can show that other organizations have purchased blocks of tickets.

Regardless of which cultivation strategies you choose, take a long hard look at this question – is a patron buying a seat in the house or a ticket through the door? When you sell a single ticket to a single performance, you are selling admission to the performance and nothing else. But when you offer subscriptions, memberships, or any other multi-performance deal, you are offering a commitment. Unless you have every detail worked out and are able to track every single patron's preferences, there is room for error. Somewhere between your implied commitment and the customer's inferred benefits lies your worst customer service nightmare. Your job NOW is to narrow or even eliminate that chasm between what you imply with a ticket sale and what a patron infers with a ticket purchase. Do this before the first subscription or package is ever sold by making clear decisions as to what benefits confer with each cultivation effort. You may think a subscription offer is a great deal that gets the patron in the door at a 25 percent discount. She may think she has purchased a great seat to any show she chooses to attend. The same great seat? Maybe. Suppose you specifically say this is not a same-seat guarantee. Case closed, right? Wrong. Your patron might fully understand this but might be thinking that her subscription entitles her to at least some great seat every show. Maybe not the same seat, but hey, "I committed to this for the entire season because I thought I was getting a great seat for every show I wanted to attend. If I had known I would be stuck in the back, I wouldn't have signed up."

Who's right? Who's wrong? Of course, the customer is right, simply because she has a valid point based on her inference of the offer. What you implied, promised or clarified as a salesperson is irrelevant when the customer's inference results in dissonance. And as a subscriber to an upstart theatre company, that customer has a legitimate expectation that her support gets her certain privileges. Clarify all of those privileges ahead of time and avoid a customer service nightmare down the road.

Try to remember you're building a base, not clearing discounted merchandise at a going out of business sale. The discount may be your hook, but it's the beginning, not the end, of your relationship with that customer.

Immediate/Extemporaneous Cultivation

Given the start-up nature of the MET, and the subsequent urgency to fill seats, an “emergency” ticket sales plan is something of a necessity. This section will borrow elements of promotion and sustained cultivation contained elsewhere in the document, and present them in the context of a crisis ticket sales effort.

The intent with an immediate promotion is to bring a specific ticket offer to as many people who meet your audience demographic as possible in a highly condensed time frame. The MET has the heavy burden of attracting patrons with few resources, so efficiency is paramount. The strategy outlined here is two-fold. First, a conventional *promotional blanket* will help ensure, to the extent possible, that a MET event is at least competing with other offerings for public attention. Second, a *community-oriented campaign* will foster direct ticket sales via a “ground-zero” marketing push; one that looks at the college as the center of the local entertainment universe and maps out resources and potential ticket buyers based on their proximity.

There are two real risks in this type of crisis marketing. Oddly, one of those is success - you can't gauge how many will respond to your efforts, although you certainly need to distribute more discount coupons and flyers than there are seats. The worst case scenario is having to turn people away at the door. While the full house will bring a smile to every face involved in the production, the turn-aways may be lost forever regardless of future promotions. And they're huge losses, since their being at the door tells you they're interested in the theatre offering. Nonetheless, it's a risk worth taking. With limited resources it's unlikely you'll issue enough promotional and marketing pieces to overbook a performance.

The second risk involves the use of a discounted ticket promotion. Those who may have purchased tickets in advance or as part of a subscription campaign will be unfairly penalized if crisis marketing efforts flaunt better discounts for everyone else. For this reason it is strongly advised that a non-discriminatory promotion be your crisis marketing rule of thumb - one in which everyone is equal or close to equal at the door, regardless of where or when they purchased their tickets.

The promotional media blanket

The promotional blanket is so named because it seeks to spread one simple sales message over all media. Hence, the message must be simple enough to be universal across all media. It must also be relevant to all audiences served by those media. Your contact with the media will focus on a special ticket promotion and will consist of a one-page public service announcement broadcast to all media, plus follow-up contacts as time allows.

Again, be sure any discounted ticket offer does not contradict or upstage any standing group sales, subscription or membership offers. Even if you currently have no patron base, it is wise to get into the habit of comparing ANY short-term promotion with your anticipated subscription, season pass or group sales pricing. Always defer to any group or sustained offer as the benchmark – your short-term cultivation efforts should never out-price them.

Examples of good promotional blanket offers

- **Date-based offer** – 10%, 20%, etc. off tickets for the show on this day only. Good when you know certain days will not sell as well as others.
- **Limited time offer** – discount good on all performances within a certain time period. Good for promoting new plays, local plays, and shows that aren't drawing a lot of interest.

- **Combination offer** – ticket sales, with or without discount, in conjunction with another offer, i.e., discounted dinner at a local restaurant. Requires coupons to be designed and produced on short notice.
- **Giveaways** – admission gifts and/or door prizes at selected times during the show.

Promotional blanket steps:

1. Choose a promotional offer, establish criteria and benchmark against all standing MET ticket offers.
2. Take care of offer logistics. For straight discounts, make sure theater and box office staff are aware of the discount and the date(s). For combination offers or giveaways, make sure partners or sponsors are aware of (and approve!) the promotion date and all details.
3. Draft offer-based public service announcement (PSA) per template provided in the appendix.
4. Utilize broadcast fax and email capabilities to send PSA to all local and regional media. (See appendix for media lists.)
5. Make follow up calls as time allows, beginning with arts and entertainment reporters, and all reporters/editors with whom you have an established working relationship.
6. Follow up calls to balance of media. Start with print media as most will have advance deadlines.
7. Post PSA to media Web sites and college Web site. Most media organizations will have a Web page dedicated to community news and information. Postings are free.

Community blitz campaign

A community blitz campaign uses flyers and personal contacts to reach as many people as possible in a highly condensed time period. This campaign works well from several days out to one day out for a particular performance. Keep it simple and stick to a universal attraction such as reduced price tickets, door prizes or straight giveaways. This ensures appeal to the diversity you're bound to find in the different communities that surround the college. And you'll want to keep this effort geographically limited as potential patrons are most likely to respond to a last minute campaign based largely on their proximity to the college.

Make sure you pitch the same offer to your communities as you do to your media contacts. Any reinforcement helps your cause; any contradiction hinders it.

This is your emergency bread and butter as it requires little planning, little time, and little cash outlay. However, you do need a core of dedicated staff/volunteers. A community crisis campaign involves making as much contact with the public as possible – through flyers, direct contact and networking – and all of this requires legwork.

This is also where the concept of “ground zero” marketing comes to life. Many of the spreadsheets and databases in the appendix contain entries representing an entity’s distance from the college, which is considered ground zero. This allows you to concentrate your efforts not only in your primary target area, but as close to the college as possible, thus maximizing efficiency in getting materials out in a highly condensed time frame. These lists should be further refined by zip code, phone code, or ADC map coordinates as appropriate to enable you to carry out an effective crisis cultivation effort with even greater efficiency. In sorting by zip code and phone code you can target and track efforts for very specific communities. Map coordinates will help you direct your labor force in the most efficient manner possible.

Know ahead of time what labor you will need to accomplish every part of a community blitz strategy. While there will be little time to plan every move, there's usually less time to waste waiting. Try to assemble a list of tasks and a list of talent and match those to the extent possible for each community blitz effort.

Here's a good starting list of tasks:

- Establish material needs
- Design materials
- Produce materials
- Deliver materials to central location
- Disperse materials among labor pool
- Map distribution routes and locations according to "ground zero" philosophy
- Divide distribution routes and locations among available labor pool
- Distribute materials
- Establish personal contact plan based on labor pool contacts and locations

Expand on this list and match each task you can think of with the person you think is most capable of accomplishing the task. Lacking any knowledge of their capabilities, look at their interests and proximity.

Community flyers and posters

Your ability to sell tickets in a short time period will hinge on your ability to connect with the people closest to the college - quickly. This does not preclude you from selling tickets elsewhere in the region; it just means that for efficiency's sake you need to stay in your own yard where you can get the best return for your effort. Essentially, you want to take your media message, put it in writing in the form of flyers and posters, and spread it around as many neighborhoods as possible. This scattershot approach is not very efficient in terms of numbers. You need to hit a lot of areas to make it work. But, with a structured plan and efficient labor pool, you can achieve better than average results in getting bodies into the theatre at the last minute.

After covering all the media bases, you'll want to reinforce the same message via contact with your target audience. Flyers and posters need to be produced for mass distribution in neighborhoods, churches and commercial parking lots if permitted. Flyers also need to be posted on bulletin boards as appropriate.

For efficiency's sake, you'll want to produce as few versions of the simplest items possible. Remember your content will be dictated by the offer or message – which was spelled out in your media campaign above. Now you have to take that message and make it visual, and relevant to your target audience.

Your posters and flyers will include ALL of the following:

- MET logo and tagline
- An attention-getting offer or message headline/title, in large type and no more than two lines
- Details of the offer or message in one short paragraph
- Any effective date(s)
- Contact information – phone, fax, email and website
- Location information – quick directions or a map showing the college
- Other draws – free parking, handicapped accessible

- Flyers - minimal or no graphics other than the logo
- Posters – minimal graphics related to the performance (if appropriate) or supporting the offer/message

Producing posters and flyers

Consult in-house designers and print shop NOW, well in advance of any critical needs. Let them know you will be looking to them for help on last-minute ticket sales items and ask what their needs are. Ask if designers can help prepare poster and flyer templates with a common MET-oriented look. You'll need to check production capabilities first – don't design anything that can't be produced in-house. Ideally, you could have shells pre-printed, with a text templates so posters and flyers can be photocopied. This would limit your poster size to 11x17, but that may be fine considering the cost-effectiveness. Once shells and templates are pre-printed, you can take these items to any copying center. Then it's just a matter of laying out your text according to the templates, and copying onto your shells. This puts control of any last-minute materials completely in your hands, and allows you to produce materials on extremely short notice, including nights and weekends.

Distribution

If you have successfully matched people with tasks as outlined earlier, you can focus on mapping distribution routes and times. Sort your community lists (churches, shopping centers, businesses, neighborhoods) by ground zero. Now take all of your available labor for distribution (this may mean everybody!) and match them with areas.

Create a new spreadsheet for community blitz campaigns. Your fields should include establishment/area covered, person, date scheduled, date completed, number of posters, and number of flyers. Your goals with this are to organize and track each campaign. With everyone assigned distribution areas, it's easy to fill in holes should someone get sick. It's also easy to shift your resources if someone needs help. Finally, you will be able to track where every flyer and poster is going. You can then ask callers how they found out about the performance or the MET, and match responses to your spreadsheet to see which areas are yielding the best results.

Word of mouth

While it seems obvious, the importance of personal contacts cannot be underestimated. Far too often a theatre desperate to fill seats does not get the full benefit of personal networking because those involved with the performance and supporting the production never think of themselves as marketers or those in their social circles as audience members. To get the full benefit of such relationships, everyone involved with the theatre needs to do the following:

Write down the names of friend, family member, coworker and casual acquaintance with whom they have had ANY contact in the past six months. This will require a great deal of thought, and each person's list could grow to be quite substantial. Decide the most appropriate way to contact each person on the list – in person, phone call, email, etc. Prior to making contact, outline a specific strategy for presenting the MET. It could be a promotion, it could be to invite someone to a performance, or just to inform them of the performance and remind them of some of the MET's great features (proximity, price, parking, black-oriented). A good all purpose pitch is to simply gain their support for an up and coming theatre company. Be sure to ask if they have children, relatives or friends who might be interested, and leave the number or web address of the MET.

Sustained Cultivation

Group Sales

By far the most effective and efficient cultivation avenue the start-up theatre company should pursue is group sales. The goal is to sell seats to organizations rather than relying on individual ticket sales or subscription sales. Why is group sales preferable to subscriptions? Subscriptions are individualistic. Though the volatility, in terms of expected attendance, is higher with group sales, the blend of people attending is usually far more diverse and dynamic than you would get via subscriptions. Group members tend to communicate more frequently and more freely; hence the all important word-of-mouth potential is significantly higher when dealing with group sales patrons. Group sales give you exposure not just to each member of the group, but to the collective power of the group. This is a subtle yet extremely critical advantage that allows the arts organization to use their need to fill seats as a foot in the door to potential sponsorship, in-kind support and a host of other benefits to the arts organization. For this reason especially, it is crucial to establish group sales targets so you can approach with specific long-range goals in mind, even though the immediate task is to sell tickets.

This does not mean that every group is a potential partner. Most will simply be good sales targets. But it does mean that you should consider future benefits of an ongoing relationship with certain groups before you give them the “buy now” sales pitch. You will often find that your best avenue to selling them seats is to avoid a sales pitch entirely and concentrate on establishing a reciprocal relationship. More on group relationships can be found in the Support section of this document.

Finally, group sales can lead to resales. While your bottom line is not directly improved by resales, your reach is extended and more seats are filled. The ability to resell tickets at a profit can be a strong draw for some organizations such as schools and scouts.

What kinds of groups are we talking about?

Churches, schools, businesses, civic groups, scouting organizations, service organizations (Rotary, Kiwanis, Lions, etc.), government agencies, business and professional organizations (BPW, Toastmasters), unions, fraternities and sororities. Virtually any definable group is a good target for your cultivation efforts.

Specific pitches to make for groups include:

- Schools – fundraisers (resale), field trips, use tickets as student performance rewards
- Businesses – use tickets as employee rewards, become a ground-level supporter of the area’s up-and-coming theater company (pitch to executives)
- Service organizations – fundraisers (resale, raffle), club gifts, rewards
- Churches – fundraising (resale), church outings, gifts for children/families in need

The group approach

Your first order of business is defining a clear reason for approaching a group. The reason has to be in line with the goals of the MET, of course. But it also has to be in line with, and beneficial to, the organization you are approaching.

MET's reasons for selling tickets to a group:

- Quantity ticket sales
- Introduce the MET
- Business and networking relationships
- Find ticket resale partner to help fill seats and expand recognition

Group's reasons for buying tickets from the MET:

- Interested in theatre
- Interested in supporting local organizations for business and/or cultural reasons
- Interested in making money
- Looking for new group members

Suffice to say, you're not that far apart from most groups even before you walk in the door. Arm yourself with a basic strategy that communicates your needs and wants and respects the group's time, views (if appropriate) and needs. Note that making a sales pitch to a group is not the same as making a presentation. Your cultivation efforts can take place primarily via phone, mail and email, although personal visits are not out of the question. Keep sales calls distinct from other business such as establishing support relationships and partnerships, and be sure any visits expressly for sales purposes are communicated as such

Here's a sample group discount offer that could serve as a good starter. This is just a simple example; in the course of your sales efforts you will likely find reasons to offer further discounts. Just be sure to do the math before committing.

"Meet the MET" group ticket offer

Regular ticket price \$15
Meet the MET discount price \$12

For a three-show season, here's how you might package your tickets...

4 or fewer (fifth ticket free). Cost is based on a three-show ticket.

1 = \$36
2 = \$72
3 = \$108
4 = \$144

A fifth Meet the MET ticket is FREE due to tiered discount providing additional 20 percent reduction for purchases of five or more. Remember that each Meet the MET "ticket" is actually a ticket for three shows during the current or upcoming season.

To make sense of the math, let's look at tickets purchased in groups of five or more. Take the first four tickets at \$12 each and multiply by three shows, then deduct an additional 20 percent from the TOTAL, not just the fifth ticket and beyond.

5 = \$144 (5 x \$36 = \$180, deduct 20 percent = \$144)

To arrive at an average ticket cost, divide the total price of \$144 by the total number of tickets – 15 (five tickets per show times three shows) and you get an average cost per ticket of \$9.60. Quite a bargain for the buyer.

Add one more ticket to be sure the math makes sense:
 $6 = \$168$ ($6 \times \$36 = \216 , deduct 20 percent = $\$172.80$)

Now check your average ticket cost by taking $\$172.80$ and dividing it by the total number of tickets (18 – six Meet the MET “tickets” times three shows per ticket) and you get an average cost of $\$9.60$.

Your average ticket price will drop again when you add another discount tier to the equation. You can arrange the discount percentages and tiers any way you like, and you may have to take into consideration the average sizes of the groups with which you are dealing. But the “buy four, get one free” is usually a good starting point.

Your goal here is to understand the basic math of tiered discounting so you can demonstrate to groups the benefits of buying in quantity. This will give you enormous support when encouraging groups to purchase your tickets for resale.

Whatever you decide to offer, remember a basic math principle that seems to elude the majority of American consumers – percentage discounts are not additive. If an item is $\$1$ and it is marked down 10 percent it costs 90 cents. If an additional 10 percent discount is given at the register, the item costs 81 cents. Note this is an effective discount of 19 percent. Far too many consumers find it easy to simply look at 10 percent + 10 percent and call it a 20 percent discount. Just remember a percentage discount is a discount of some original number. Once you take any percentage discount, you’re dealing with a new original number for any further discounts.

Resales

Most sustained group sales efforts have two purposes in mind. First, they reward the group for its support with a discount and perhaps other amenities (tours, backstage visits, special recognition). Second, they encourage groups to resell the tickets and make a profit to support their own causes. The theatre company stands to benefit greatly when a group resells tickets because such sales generate further recognition of the company, and help to fill seats.

Before embracing the concept of group resales, entertain some of the pitfalls. The most obvious is reputation. Anyone who attempts to resell just one of your tickets is an agent of the company – maybe not legally - but from a marketing perspective they are representing you the minute they solicit a ticket. Everything they say or do to sell a ticket can be construed as something the theatre company promised. If I stand on the corner and blast to the world that after tonight’s MET performance there will be free ice cream for everyone, you can bet the local children will take it as fact and scamper home to tell their parents.

No, it doesn’t usually wind up that way. But you should always be aware of your reputation – where it is, who controls it, who can alter it. The single riskiest thing you can do with your reputation is place it in the hands of someone looking to make a profit, with no defined or contractual obligation to uphold the standards of the theatre company. Agents and PR firms are entrusted with reputations on a daily basis. But they are not only bound by contract, they are bound by the desire to further their own business and personal reputations. The groups you choose may be well defined themselves – in fact this should be a requirement – but some of the individual members may have no concern for your reputation whatsoever.

Another risk in reselling is implied liability. What if a group member with the greatest of intentions is injured or causes injury or property damage in some way while in the course of securing a transaction involving your tickets? While it's not your fault, today's litigious society allows plaintiffs to tie everyone directly or indirectly associated with an incident to the subsequent lawsuit.

The safest way to avoid all this is not to pursue reselling at all. The next best bet would be to have an iron clad contract that spells out the roles and responsibilities of each party involved. This will convey the seriousness of the business relationship. Alas, it will usually kill such a relationship before it begins. Most group contacts are loosely structured for social reasons. Whipping out a 10-page contract can spoil the mood, ruin any sense of trust, or leave groups with an overwhelming feeling of obligation and work. The thrill is then gone, and with it so are sales.

There is a way to make this work. Consider reselling on a very limited basis, only with groups that are established and part of a structure where social if not legal accountability is inherent. Public schools are a perfect example. Well-established service organizations such as scouts, Rotary, Kiwanis, Knights of Columbus, etc. are also viable resellers. They have a history; they are comprised of loyal members willing to sacrifice their time and money for the causes of the organization; they meet regularly and are bound by well established charter regulations providing for their conduct as a group, and they are almost always the people strongly involved in their communities.

An even better component of both service organizations and public schools is that you can approach them with a contract and nobody will run screaming from the room. But it's generally not necessary to get the lawyers involved. By being organized and bringing some basic materials along, you can strike a mutually beneficial deal with few headaches on either side.

Subscriptions

Subscriptions form the audience base for most larger theatre companies. The MET's status as a true upstart in Prince George's County means more emphasis should be placed on group sales and other better leveraged efforts than on subscriptions, at least until a good audience base is established.

The board of directors should be invited to submit opinions on a subscription program(s). Any first attempt at a subscription program should be straightforward with a limited discount or combination offer. Note that reaching potential subscribers will be inefficient at first if the organization cannot afford to purchase or compile key mailing lists outlined earlier.

With no subscription history in this area, the MET will have a difficult time gauging an effective ratio of contacts to actual subscriptions. But with an 800 seat house and a county of some 700,000 residents (250,000 households), there are statistical plusses without even looking at the secondary or tertiary target markets. An effective sustained cultivation effort doesn't mean every stone has to be turned. Again looking at limited resources, it would behoove the MET to start small and concentrate on nurturing a subscription base that is sufficiently under seating capacity to allow for the preferred draw of group sales. It will take at least two seasons to discover how effectively each component of sustained cultivation is actually working.

Getting back to numbers, a prudent first step would be to establish a trial subscription campaign, using perhaps a 500-household sample from the primary target area around the college. Keep track of hard costs (postage, photocopying, subscription form and brochure design fees) and soft costs (follow up calls, time needed to prepare list and assemble mailings, etc.). If the value of the subscriptions received equals or exceeds the combined hard and soft costs needed to reach the sample audience, then it's a slam dunk - double your subscription efforts and measure the results again. As long as subscription sales can cover the cost needed to execute them, this is a winning scenario.

The subscription form

It's probably safe to say that the theater company has a lot of pride in its performances. Much time and effort goes into getting ready for every single show, and the performers want the audience to get everything they expect and perhaps a little bit more. It makes no sense, then, to put any less effort into the theater company's marketing and cultivation materials, including the subscription form.

Because the MET is the new kid in town, the subscription form may very well be your first contact with selected households. Make it count. While there are no set rules for exactly what can and cannot be in the form, keep in mind this is an offer, an enticement. It is also a promise, a commitment - to decent seats for a decent performance in a safe, friendly environment. Finally, it is your billboard - imagine that your subscription form is a large billboard in every neighborhood that will have residents and commuters talking about the organization. What will they be saying?

There's a saying among professional horse riding instructors - that at any given time you are either training or untraining a horse. There's no in-between. Everything you do either reinforces the positive training a horse has received, or causes the animal to do something he is not supposed to do.

Every public contact you have follows the same principle. You are either selling the organization or you're unselling the organization, there's no in-between. If public contact evokes no response, you are unselling your organization because such contact costs the organization time and money, and nixes that all-important first impression.

With that in mind, here are some elements that should be in every subscription offer:

- The offer - well planned, easy to understand, written for audience's education level and their spending habits.
- The advantage - What is the advantage to subscribing. Why is there an advantage to committing to a subscription as opposed to buying individual tickets? Is it money savings? Guaranteed seating? Discounts or deals with other establishments? Recognition?
- The organization - Quick bit on the MET
- The work - Make the form as easy as possible to complete. Do not use this as an audience survey; include only the information that is necessary to secure a subscription.
- The payment - What forms of payment are accepted? Be sure to list these.
- The hook - This is the combination of graphics and text that pull you into the offer. It has to convey the purpose of the offer with a sense of flair and instant recognition. But it can't be hokey or corny - you'll lose credibility and you'll probably never get it back with the reader. Some examples – “MET-setters” and “Ready-MET-Go.”
- Identifier - the MET logo and any tagline must appear on the offer and the reply card (form)

- Reply card - This is the actual form that is to be completed and returned. Must reference payment options
- Tracking - If you plan to do any tracking of offers, include the proper notation on the card
- Reply envelope – with logo and tagline.

Full or partial plan?

One of the primary considerations with a subscription campaign is whether to offer a full subscription plan to all of the shows, or a partial plan to just selected shows. For an upstart company with a relatively short season and limited offerings, a full subscription is probably the logical choice. Subscribers rarely go to all performances for which they have paid. If one of the goals of a start-up organization is to increase exposure, it makes perfect sense to offer patrons as much exposure as possible. A full subscription gives them the maximum opportunity to experience as much of the MET as possible.

Rewards

Anyone who agrees to a subscription expects to be rewarded with quality performances. But it's a safe bet that they expect - and deserve - a little more before they ever set foot in the auditorium. While your goal in obtaining subscriptions is to fill seats and make money, the potential patrons have goals as well. High on their list is a reward - or at least the perception of a reward - just for signing on with you. This can come in many forms - a discount, guaranteed same seats, package benefits (dinner, transportation) or merchandise. Always be cognizant of the buyer's perspective and possible expectations, and be prepared to meet them.

Commission

With a small seating capacity it is not likely that subscription sales would warrant a commissioned sales rep(s). Still, the MET should be aware that this is a fairly common practice and can be structured to benefit both the organization and the sales rep quite well. For such a small theatre, you would probably need to offer an above-average commission (perhaps 25-30 percent) and provide a base salary. Don't be alarmed that even the most generous looking plan doesn't draw a bonafide salesperson. Again, this is a small theatre with very limited income opportunities. The most likely draw to this type of offer would be a college or even high school student looking to make a little extra money at certain times of the year, or perhaps a friend or family member of the cast. Go ahead and pursue these avenues, but remember you're better off having no sales rep than one who won't represent the organization in the best of lights at all times. This person is hard to find even when organizations can offer excellent compensation. Remember to record any agreement on paper. As with any agent of the company, you'll want to spell out terms of the relationship - what is expected, the compensation arrangement, including how and when the compensation will be paid, any hierarchial matters such as reporting relationships, administrative support that will and will not be provided. Expense reimbursement should be laid out ahead of time. You'll also want details of how performance will be measured, and what activities will provide for termination of the arrangement. Include subjective items such as "misrepresenting the organization" or "causing harm to the reputation and/or viability of the organization." Though difficult to prove legally should a dispute ever arise, such clauses will always provide the organization with the option to dispose of dead weight underperformers and troublemakers. The conventional wisdom that you can't expect great results in this situation is completely irrelevant. Whether a person is well paid, underpaid or completely uncompensated, the image of the organization is always on the line and the standards should be equally high and uncompromised for all. Adhere to this and you'll earn the respect of your patrons. Get their respect and you'll have their support for a long time to come.

Memberships

Much like subscriptions, memberships imply a VIP status on the part of the customer. But the membership customer will usually have lower expectations than the subscriber because of the smaller initial cash outlay and, more importantly, because of an explicit *burden of action*. In a subscription scenario, the burden of action falls back on the theatre company once a subscription has been issued. The patron has put a good deal of cash out, and has made commitments to attend several performances. This person expects rewards for offering such support – good performances, good seats, no hassles, great customer service. Even beyond this, however, the subscription customer may have higher expectations based on experiences with other arts organizations, and may confer those expectations upon the MET. These might include ticket exchange privileges, guaranteed same seats or priority seating, valet parking, etc. While any upstart theatre company would prefer to cater to seasoned arts patrons, there comes with this crowd an inherent risk – what happens if you cannot deliver the level of service expected? Can you meet the customer's expectations if they were based on experiences at, say, the Kennedy Center? Probably not. It is in the best interest of the upstart then, to not only keep the promise (offer) simple, but to minimize any *implied* promises or expectations beyond your control as much as possible. This can be accomplished through a good membership program.

Unlike subscription offers – where everything has been bought and paid for – the membership program puts a burden of action back on the customer. Why? Because the patron has only bought the *right* to discounted tickets and other amenities as defined by the arts organization or as the organization reserves the right to define at a later date. To effect any of these offers, including the discounted tickets, the patron still has the burden of action – he or she must call and check availability, then reserve tickets for a show, then pay for the tickets.

There are certainly disadvantages to selling memberships. Patrons who sign on as members may never set foot in the theatre. So you still have empty seats even though you have something to show for them. And memberships can become an administrative burden, requiring regular communication of theatre activities and events much like subscriptions.

Here are some of the items and resources you may need when implementing a membership program:

- Theatre company newsletter – should convey important news about performances, as well as basic background about shows, performers, the theatre company.
- Membership cards – a structured card program would provide a professional appearance and aid in tracking of ticket purchases. However, a membership receipt can serve the same function if the member does not feel inclined to carry a card. Indeed, many would likely not want the burden of carrying yet one more card. As long as the theatre can confirm that someone is a member, there should be no problem.
- Season schedules – these should be prepared well in advance and ample quantities should be available for a membership drive.
- Performance reminder flyers – simple flyers that can be mailed to members.
- Special offer/event flyers – simple flyers mailed to members to remind them of upcoming membership-related items.

Setting membership prices

In establishing membership cost, the theatre has to consider the costs associated with all of these materials on a seasonal basis. Don't forget the cost of administering a membership database, and other soft costs (in-kind, in-house labor, volunteers) associated with all of the membership administration activities.

Your membership fee should also look at the MET from the member's point of view. It has to respect their financial savvy, even if they have none. In other words, know ahead of time how the math works for your own program. The membership fee has to be reasonable enough to be enticing, and any ticket discount has to be substantial enough to be compelling. Sure, most members of any club or organization never fully utilize their membership potential. But that shouldn't make your offer any less attractive. In the long run, you want to fill seats.

Sample membership program

Title: MET-Setters

Goal: 400 memberships

Target: Primary market area households

Contact: Mail, canvassing

Pricing: 2-season membership for \$40

Benefits: 33 percent discount on ALL ticket purchases; quantities limited only by seating. MET-Setter newsletter subscription, invitation to selected events, and priority seating at special performances.

Restrictions: Membership is not a guarantee of seating unless reservations are made.

Reservations suggested but not required. Reserved seats will be made available to general public if not claimed 10 minutes prior to show time.

Membership math

When budgeting the membership discount, don't forget to factor in the annual membership fee.

This lowers the net average discount when applied on a per-member, per-ticket-bought basis.

So, while 33% may seem a steep discount on the surface, consider the following:

2-season membership

2 tickets per show x 3 shows per season x 2 seasons = 12 tickets

12 tickets x \$10 each (33% off the regular price of \$15) = \$120

\$120 + \$40 membership = \$160

\$160 divided by 12 tickets = \$13.33 per ticket average.

Not a great average discount after all. The question then becomes – is membership worthwhile to the customer? Like all membership offers, the answer depends on frequency of use. Let's assume a patron only purchases 4 tickets over the two-season period:

4 tickets x \$10 = \$40

\$40 + \$40 membership = \$80

\$80 divided by 4 tickets = \$20.

From the patron's perspective, this certainly is not a good deal. He could have just purchased tickets at the door and saved \$5 each. And so it goes with memberships – the good thing is the burden for projected use falls on the patron. Your burden in making a membership offer is to know the scenarios ahead of time, understand how the math works, and be able to sell the other benefits should a patron actually do the math and realize membership is not worth her \$40.

So where is the patron's break even using these figures? Let's look quickly at the math again, where U is the number of tickets necessary to effect an average ticket price equal to the regular price of \$15:

$$\text{\$40 membership} + (\text{\$10} \times \text{U tickets}) = \text{\$15} \times \text{U tickets}$$

$$40 + 10U = 15U$$

$$40 = 15U - 10U$$

$$40 = 5U$$

$$U = 8 \text{ tickets}$$

If none of the other benefits matter to the member, she would have to purchase 8 tickets over the course of two seasons to make her membership worthwhile.

This number is as significant to the theatre company as it is to the patron, as it allows you to scrutinize your administrative resources and marketing posture and find an honest answer to this question: Can I reasonably expect this member to purchase at least eight tickets over the next two seasons? In other words, do you have the resources to make sure every member is informed of every show, is notified about special events and promotions, and FEELS sufficiently rewarded (above and beyond non-members) for their commitment?

Still, the break-even analysis should not be a focal point of your sales efforts. While you want to sell tickets, you don't have to get a ticket commitment at the same time you get a subscription commitment. Remember the premise of a membership offer is the burden of action that falls on the consumer. It is the consumer's responsibility to know his or her spending habits.

From the theatre's perspective, besides providing \$40 to the coffer, a membership gives you crucial audience demographics and the right to contact a member with ticket offers and theater information anytime during the next two seasons. Chances are good that with a well-planned and executed follow-up strategy, you will get a member to several performances over the course of two seasons.

ADMINISTRATION

Guidance/Oversight

- The director of the organization shall guide the formation of a Board of Directors as he/she sees appropriate.
- The formation of a Business Advisory Group is also recommended. Details for the establishment of this group can be found in the Support chapter.

Policies and Procedures

Marketing can involve complex interpersonal relationships both inside and outside the organization. For this reason, basic policies and procedures should be established for ALL supporters, regular staff and agents of the MET, whether volunteer or paid. The director, in conjunction with the Board of Directors and Business Advisory Group, should set personnel standards consistent with the industry and unilaterally enforceable without regard to position, rank, influence or tenure. The establishment of such regulations will foster an air of credibility within the organization should disputes arise over personnel/performance issues.

The following should be included in any policies and procedures adopted:

- The MET's mission, vision and goals
- A code of conduct for all performers, supporters, regular staff and agents of the MET
- Penalties appropriate for certain violations of the code of conduct
- Grievance procedures
- A legally-enforceable clause expressing the MET's right to terminate any relationship with any performers, representatives and agents who do not abide by the code of conduct

Legal Issues

It is difficult to envision any marketing-related liabilities arising that would not be covered in some way by the college. However, the MET's marketing efforts will bring it in contact with various segments of the general public, businesses, and media. Such efforts will also involve volunteers, interns, college employees, contract employees, and other "agents" of the MET.

To this extent, the MET could be liable, overtly or implicitly, for any of the following:

- Damage or harm to the college's reputation caused by an agent of the MET
- Damage or harm to the reputation of a person or business caused by an agent of the MET
- Physical or emotional harm inflicted by an agent of the MET while on MET business
- Property damage caused by an agent of the MET while on MET business
- Injury to an agent of the MET or his/her family while that agent is on MET business
- Property damage suffered by an agent of the MET or his/her family while on MET business
- Breach of contract with a business partner or subscriber

There are certainly other legal issues that could arise at any time in the course of marketing the organization, but these would be among the most likely. From an auto accident while delivering flyers, to an irate in-kind business partner who was disappointed with his end of the bargain, there is more to the legal landscape than the average small theater company can handle alone. It would be wise to approach college counsel and outside counsel if necessary to determine exactly what risks the MET faces should it pursue any of the marketing recommendations contained in this document.

Division of Labor

Perhaps there is money for at least part time staff. Perhaps there isn't. The beauty of shoestring marketing is that it really doesn't matter. You want to squeeze every ounce of efficiency out of every person involved, regardless of their salary – or lack thereof. In fact, there can be times when it is better NOT to have paid staff. If one or two people are receiving monetary compensation, while everyone around them is busting butt for love of the theatre, there can be friction. For this reason, it is especially important to completely define every conceivable labor need within the organization. When it comes time to actually pay someone, you can clearly define that person's responsibilities, and demonstrate to others why they should get paid.

Regardless of the people involved, the tasks are the same. Your goal is to have an inventory of all tasks associated with marketing the theatre company. From there, you'll want to inventory the skills and interests of the people involved and others in the organization who might be available from time to time to help – actors, directors, producers, stage hands, box office help, ushers.

Here's a general list of theatre marketing tasks:

- Logo and tagline creation
- Flyer design
- Database research/creation
- Database management
- Photocopying
- Flyer distribution
- Mail list processing
- Envelope stuffing
- Envelope labeling
- Community performances
- MET presentations to community groups, businesses, etc.
- Radio interviews
- Television Interviews
- Print interviews
- Media contact
- PSA and press release writing
- Faxing
- Emailing
- Driving/deliveries
- Flyer/trash collection
- Bulletin board posting
- Guest list management
- Letter writing
- Phone calls to businesses, schools, community leaders. etc.

Examine your organization and add tasks as appropriate. Create a spreadsheet to guide your labor efforts using the following basic headings for the document:

- Task
- Frequency
- Estimated time
- Date of next occurrence
- Person(s)/organization(s) slated for the task.

You might consider classifying labor needs under subheadings to make things easier, i.e., Fulfillment (all mailing-related work), Distribution (bulletin board posting, flyer distribution).

Don't hesitate to use this list as a reason to contact local businesses for support. Be sure to have a barter, sponsorship or recognition offer prepared that is in line with the value of the help you are seeking. See the Support chapter for more on establishing bartering with partners.

Lists and databases

Following are the lists, databases and spreadsheets that any arts organization should create and maintain. Many starter lists for the MET have been included with this document, however, creation and management of any worthwhile list is an ongoing process.

- Media
- Churches
- Civic organizations
- Service organizations
- Shopping centers
- Schools
- Businesses
- Benefactors
- Active Audience
- Alumni
- Arts organizations
- Office parks/complexes – newsletters and bulletin boards

Ground Zero lists

As part of the blitz marketing covered in the Cultivation section, you will need to establish and maintain “ground zero” lists to ensure maximum efficiency in reaching the audience closest to your door. These lists should use the college as “ground zero” and work outward. Note that with the proper structure, any list can become a ground zero tool. The easiest and most accurate way to accomplish this is to ascertain distances from the college for each list entry, and employ a separate field to sort the entire list by distance. You'll notice the starter list of restaurants has some 500 entries within a 10-mile radius of the college. For lists this large it is essential to prioritize based on location. You simply do not have the labor necessary to cover the entire list. More on list usage can be found in the Promotion and Cultivation sections of this document.

Basic ground-zero list fields:

- Distance from college
- Zip codes – Prince George's County
- Phone codes – Prince George's County; first three digits to indicate area
- ADC map coordinates – Prince George's County

Note that these are all geographic identifiers. Nothing will be more useful in all of your marketing and promotion efforts than knowing how and where to find your potential audience, partners, supporters, volunteers, etc. without wasting time.

PROMOTION

The Elements of Promotion

If you remember nothing else about promoting your organization, remember this simple definition of what good promotion is: *Regular contact with a clear purpose.*

This is the sustenance for any business relationship, and your promotional efforts should be viewed as nothing less than important relationships. They need to be created and sustained, and this only comes through sacrifice on your part. To twist the old maxim: Teach a promoter to draft a press release and he'll reach a fax machine. Teach him to know who is reading the faxes and he'll reach an audience. Too often organizations with important messages think their job is to get the media to know them, prior to, or even without any reciprocity.

“Promotion” for purposes of this document refers to the packaging, marketing and selling of your organization through media and community outlets. We will consider everything about you as being for sale (except tickets) in this section. This means your organization's history, current status, performers, supporters and volunteers, facilities, reputation and character. Every aspect of the organization, tangible and intangible, should be seen in terms of its ability to promote the entire organization in some way.

Relationships 101 – courting the media with caution

- 1) Make it a point to contact every organization on your media list. If you don't already have contact names, your first order of business is to get them. Describe your organization and ask who would be the proper person to receive your information.
- 2) Prior to sending any information or requests, make sure you establish actual contact with every name on your list. Via phone, email, fax or in person, it doesn't matter. You don't want to get used to sending things to a name on a list; make sure that each name has heard from you. This doesn't have to happen all at once, and it doesn't have to be accomplished by the same person. Split the task of initial media contact among several CAPABLE people, but be sure to reconcile contact information so everybody is on the same page.
- 3) You now have the foundation for a working relationship with every single person on your media list. As such, you now have obligations and responsibilities – to keep in regular contact with each person. You can define “regular” contact based on your time constraints, but monthly is a good starting point. This means that even if you have nothing going on, you need to find a purpose for contacting your media people. Your purpose does not always have to be directly related to your business, though that is the obvious preference. But don't force things. If you believe that there is absolutely nothing newsworthy this month about your organization, find another valid purpose for contacting media. A great rapport-builder is a call to reporters with a story lead or idea. Most find it refreshing that you would think of them for something other than your own self-promotion.
- 4) It is the responsibility of the director to map out an ongoing media plan, one that involves regular press releases, interviews, invitations and direct personal contacts. All of these components MUST become a regular part of the director's functions, although they should not be seen as guaranteed avenues to immediate publicity. Effective media relations result from regular contact with a purpose. Too many organizations tend to place emphasis on MEDIA or PRESS and build false expectations of results. The emphasis here is on RELATIONS, and this is a relationship building, nurturing and maintenance process. Like any relationship it requires time, often when it is not convenient or seems almost futile.

Promotional Planning – the running media plan

The director of the organization should at all times have a running media plan to guide promotional efforts. “Running” means an ongoing plan that is forward looking, preplanning in nature, yet adaptable on the fly to take advantage of media opportunities and changing priorities within the organization. This doesn’t have to be a formal document, but it does have to be structured enough so others in the organization can interpret it if necessary.

Where to start...

- Prioritize the organization’s selling points as they relate to your primary target audience – performances and actors are the most common, although the MET’s unique focus and location give it the opportunity to push local hot buttons such as culture, accessibility and affordability. These are not simply your mission and objectives, though some selling points should come from there. They are the qualities, strengths and goals that your organization exudes in relation to your anticipated audience. For example, a strength of the MET would be its emphasis on minority participation and recognition. This alone may carry some relevance anywhere, but it is a huge selling point in Prince George’s County at this time. You need to see this aspect of your organization as your audience sees it through the media they receive. Remember to be objective and put yourself in the position of the primary target audience media recipient - someone who reads local and regional newspapers, listens to the radio and watches television.
- Based on your media relationships, try to build a list of “favorite topics and coverage angles” that you can associate with each media contact.
- Try to match your “selling points” list with your media “favorite topics” list so you know at a glance how your organization might appeal to individual reporters, editors and media contacts. This will enable you to more efficiently tailor your media pitches, and to better respect the time and topic constraints of your media contacts.
- Check your local media on a regular basis to see what coverage is given to other arts related organizations and events.

Chances are good that performances and performers dominate most theater coverage in your media. These are the angles that most reporters, writers and editors pursue – they’re easy to follow, and provide for a lot of color and freedom on the part of the writer. Your job is to make your theater company's performances and performers as interesting as possible to the writer without appearing to make a blatant sales pitch. Review previous coverage, look at your situation and draft your pitches. Don't attempt to break new ground in these basic areas; this is boilerplate feature for most writers.

You can be a little more daring in preparing the rest of your media coverage list. In fact, most other organizations won't go beyond the performances and performers pitches when dealing with the media. This is where you can get a little extra push from certain media, though you will have to work harder and be patient.

Creation of MET identifiers

Logo(s)

A unique MET-identifying logo should be adopted as soon as possible for use on all contact with the media and general public, including press releases, letters, performance schedules, marketing materials, banners, signs, promotional items, etc. One logo is preferable, though two may be designed with similar characteristics for portrait and landscape use as needed. The logo should meet professional design standards, regardless of its origin, and should be approved by the MET director and the MET Board, as well as your business advisory group if established.

There are rules...

While it seems every business has a logo of some sort, you should take great care to adopt a design that will achieve specific marketing results. A logo should be so simple that it is easily remembered, yet it should be so distinct that it is not easily confused with other logos. It should convey the gist of what your organization is and does, and it should accomplish this without being offensive or ambiguous.

Tagline(s)

A well-constructed and appropriate slogan or tagline can wield as much marketing power as the logo. In some cases it can be even more effective than its visual counterpart, especially if it conveys strong emotion or evokes a strong response among the primary target audience. A tagline also has the advantage of excellent media appeal – it can provide instant recognition across all broadcast media. To construct a good tagline, use language that is appropriate for your primary target audience, be concise, and tell something memorable about your organization. Use humor, cadence, rhyme or any linguistic device that serves the purpose. Don't confuse a standing tagline with a short-term promotional line. Your tagline should be considered permanent – something that will be used all the time; something that everyone in the public domain will associate with the organization at all times, not just for specific promotional periods.

Promotional Avenues

In promoting the MET in general and promoting specific performances, you'll want to refer to the appropriate, accepted medium for the task at hand. Being able to effectively craft and match your message with the medium is critical to successful promotion. Notice this section, like much of this document, does not elevate mainstream media over grass-roots promotional efforts. All are necessary, and at times the community-based promotional work will yield far greater returns than energy spent on more prestigious media.

Print (general)

Efforts to reach print media should be substantial and should touch all levels of the promotional priorities pyramid explained below. When pitching to print media, remember you have to sell your topic or angle to the editor (or reporter) and the reader. The more you know about both, the easier your job will be.

Radio

Radio will be used on a limited basis locally and regionally, and on extremely rare occasions beyond that since there are few radio outlets that are both national in reach and relevant to the MET's promotional efforts. National Public Radio is one notable exception to the national rule, and you will on occasion want to contact them with appropriate angles and topics. Be sure to

familiarize yourself with the different programs, personalities, and formats prior to making any contact. Visit www.npr.org and study the offerings carefully.

Local radio efforts will center around dated PSA topics – performances, promotions, auditions – and select features that fit a radio station’s programming. Don’t count on any in-depth coverage from radio stations as this is simply not their format. Any feature topics you present will have to be transformed into remarkably good listening material that conveys the story line in 30 seconds or less.

Next to PSAs, your best use of radio will be the interview. Create and maintain a list of performers and supporters who would be good interviews, and match these people with particular topics that are of interest to them and/or that they would be relaxed and lucid in conveying in an interview format. Listen to interview programs and practice differentiating between the person and the topic. Most times you’ll find that the interviewee is a subject matter expert whose role is explaining or commenting on a particular topic. While the person can be the topic, you likely will not have someone in your midst whose name alone is a strong media draw. Still, get to know your people and your radio station interview programs and always be on the lookout for that rare person who has a colorful, saleable background and presentation style.

Television

Much like radio, television requires brevity. Regional television news programs will have a consistently larger audience than radio, and the visual nature of the medium makes it ideally suited to coverage of theater performances. Unfortunately, television news is driven more by breaking events and public hot buttons than well-planned features or local arts information. The odds of getting consistent television coverage are not good, but the payoff of broad exposure makes it worth your while to devise a television promotional strategy.

Get to know the Washington area’s television arts and entertainment reporters. Become familiar with their styles and the formats of their segments before making any contact. Draft a personal letter, introducing yourself and the MET and inviting each reporter to the college to learn more about the MET and its mission, goals and target audience. Don’t expect them to come; they usually don’t. But making the offer gives you legitimacy in following up with calls. It also gives you leverage in reminding entertainment reporters and critics that if they haven’t been to see the MET, they probably haven’t been reporting about local black theater, or any theater in Prince George’s County. You don’t want to nag with this reminder, but you do want to convey the uniqueness of the MET, its location and its purpose.

Web

Naturally, the MET needs a presence on the college Web site. Ideally, you’ll want a separate site linked to the college home page. This will allow you to explore promotional and marketing angles not possible while buried in the college Web site. (“METNet” and “MET on the ‘Net” could be two simple advertising hooks.)

Regardless of its location, any MET Web presence should include performance dates, ticket prices, history, mission and goals, press releases, and contact information.

The MET should also be registered with as many Web search engines as possible. Anyone can do this by following each search engine’s instructions. If someone in-house can’t accomplish this, try to barter for such services. You want to make it as easy as possible for people to find

you. Being listed in a search engine will only make you one a million, but it will put your name in play on a global basis. And it's usually free. Look at the most common search engines first – Yahoo, AltaVista, AOL. More specialized engines might require a fee for listing, so be careful which ones you choose. Google is a must, as it is one of the best and easiest to use for finding Web sites.

Finally, you'll want the MET to be linked to as many relevant sites as possible. Start with arts organizations – search the Internet for as many as you can find, and see if they have a section to add your link. Then move to sites related to the Washington area, sites related to Prince George's County, and other college sites. Wherever possible, add your link to those sites. Again, these are long shots for any meaningful results, but they will put you on the map.

Community

Community promotional efforts rely on several grass-roots strategies to acquaint area residents, students, and employees with the MET. Much of this work is labor intensive, but it is relatively inexpensive and provides your best chance for getting quick responses from your target audience. Remember that your goals for community cultivation, promotion and support must remain distinct to preserve and enhance organizational credibility. Community promotional efforts should NEVER jeopardize your community partnerships and support relations, no matter how desperate you may be to spread the word.

To that end, it is preferable to embark on community promotional efforts only where the organization has established support relationships or favorable ties. Of course, your ideal is to have such relationships in every community that comprises your primary target audience. The sooner you get started nurturing community relationships, the more effective your community promotional efforts will be.

Remember that promotion of the organization is different from cultivation. Your crisis cultivation efforts mentioned earlier need to take the shortest route possible to community front lines for a specific purpose – selling tickets. While these efforts can help bolster awareness of the organization, they usually do little to craft or enhance your image. Hence, the community promotional endeavor is doubly important as it needs to convey a sense of character and class that may even contradict what has been surmised from a crisis cultivation campaign.

Elements of community promotion

Posters/flyers

If parking lot windshields are the only thing that come to mind when you here “flyers,” you've already spent too much time in crisis cultivation. Promoting a *performance* can be accomplished in the parking lot. Promoting the MET as a viable, vibrant, intellectual arts organization with local roots will not be as successful this way. Ditto for posters. Don't expect to enhance your image and gain long-term community support and interest by slapping 24x30s on telephone poles at key intersections. Sure, you'll get a lot of exposure. But it will be alongside the latest gangsta rap performance or home-cut CD. If this is your niche, have at it. If not, count on spending a little more effort on your materials and their distribution.

All posters and flyers should be quality items designed to serve specific, non performance-related purposes. Good starting topics include performers, a MET introduction and casting calls.

There's no need to review every detail of all three here, but let's use performer posters as a quick

example. Your purpose is to promote the MET as an organization tied to a specific community because of the performer. This form of indirect promotion benefits both the performer and the organization. You could conceivably end up producing several different posters, depending on who is in what production, and what communities are represented by the performers. Elements to include on a performer poster are quality photography and art (glamour-type shot), performer name, home town/community/neighborhood, MET name, address and logo, and production in which the person is appearing. If space permits, list past performance credits.

Look in-house first for production assistance. You won't need many copies of each, but you may be limited in the number of different versions you can produce. Barring sufficient support, you should look for barter opportunities from your partners (see the Support section). The posters produced should be displayed in churches, community and recreation centers, schools, shopping centers, and businesses that are in the performer's identified community. If resources allow, you can tailor posters to their specific posting places, i.e., if the performer is a graduate of the community's high school, mention this in the poster and include any appropriate background such as graduating class and honors.

You simply want to capitalize on a person's local name recognition. By promoting local performers you also gain an exponent in your cultivation efforts. The performer will talk; her friends and family will talk. Soon the whole community is talking. Just remember to maintain standards - the more character and style you can convey about your performers, the more patrons will come to see the MET as a quality venue. It's character by association.

Also remember to secure all necessary approvals before posting ANY of your materials. And take the time to remove materials when they become dated.

Personal presentations

These would consist of brief appearances at service organizations, civic groups, churches and schools for the purpose of promoting a community-based aspect of the MET. Again, you are not there to hawk tickets. You will get requests for them; you should thank people for their inquiries and kindly refer them to the box office. Your visits should be niche-specific – to let members of a particular group know about something that involves the MET and their community, organization, cause, members, etc. This will require homework on your part. Perhaps a performer is tied to their community in some way. Perhaps the current performance deals with issues addressed by an organization or church.

In matching your material to an organization, don't overlook the business side of the theater. Many service clubs such as Rotary are very business-oriented and you would be welcome to convey any business angle of the MET or the theater industry in general.

Civic organizations offer you a chance to appear before the most active members of a community. Whether it's a civic, condo, townhouse or homeowners association, you're likely to find a community's can-doers among the ranks. Further, many of these associations boast community members who are well connected in local business, political, and social circles. As you establish support relationships with these groups, look to them as excellent promotional mouthpieces and stay in regular contact.

The MET director should send a personal letter to each civic association president, introducing the MET and expressing a desire to get acquainted with the organization's members and their

community. Follow up with calls and arrange to attend as many different meetings as possible. Ask for five minutes on each agenda to present MET history, goals, needs, current productions, and opportunities.

Consider this type effort part of your promotional routine. Remember there is never a downside to face time with community mouthpieces. Utilize several knowledgeable, trusted employees, volunteers and supporters to get the MET to as many meetings as possible.

Trade

Promotion via trade media utilizes the primary avenues listed above, mostly print. It is worth a separate mention because your contact with any arts-specific media organization will be very focused and relevant only to a very select audience. For these reasons, the medium is not as important as the message. Paramount to conveying your message is your organization's ability to be perceived by arts media as credible, viable, and successful in some way.

Trade media will generally not help you fill seats or even promote your organization locally. What they will do is give you respect among your peers, open channels of outside interest (and possible funding!), and provide you and your performers and supporters a link to the national and international arts world. You'll generally want to contact trade media with success stories, cultural niche features, and biographical information.

Promotional Priorities - MET publicity, promotion, and positioning

Every promotional angle of the MET should be viewed in terms of its relationship to the four promotional priority areas – local, regional, national and trade. Some angles may be appropriate in only one area; others may find appeal in all four. While the angles themselves are sufficient grounds for promotional pitches, you should be looking for topics within each angle, and be able to make quick decisions as to which topics would have the best appeal in the four areas. It sounds more complicated than it actually is. For example, the “performer bios” angle is a constant, although the topics (the performers) will change frequently. You might one day find yourself working with a performer who has national exposure. In this case you wouldn't hesitate to pitch this person to media in all four areas – local, regional, national and trade. In contrast, most of your performers will likely be locals, with no experience or exposure outside the immediate area. You would limit your promotional efforts in these cases to local and regional media.

Note that effective use of a promotional priority system requires good decision making in gray areas – what if you have a local performer who is SO good that she has potential for national recognition? In this case you would take the time to promote her to national media, even though the odds of securing such exposure are slim.

Remember in EVERY promotional tool you use to include the name of the theater company, the name of the college, the city and state. For local efforts only, you should consider location identifiers if space allows, i.e., “The MET is located at Prince George's Community College in Largo, MD, one half mile outside the Beltway on Central Avenue, Route 214.” In finding the simplest and most effective way to convey this extra bit of information, determine how local residents and frequent visitors see the location – in relation to Route 202? In relation to Central Avenue? Both?

The extra emphasis will help local readers/viewers/listeners attach a geographical area to the MET and to a lesser extent make subconscious links when taking in other messages that mention theater, the Largo area, or PGCC.

Some basic priority angles are listed below. Remember that this list is by no means finite; it's simply a guide to get you in the habit of prioritizing your promotional efforts.

Promotional angles:

- MET history
- Performance schedule
- Cultural appeals
- Performer bios
- Director bio
- Facilities
- Theater market demographics
- Supporters, sponsors and contributors
- Ticket and event promotions
- General ticket information
- Workshops
- Open rehearsals
- Fundraisers
- Public appearances – individual or group performance
- Accomplishments and milestones
- Volunteer opportunities
- Casting calls and announcements
- Performance info

Remember, these angles will fall into one or more of four simple promotional priority areas:

- Local
- Regional
- National
- Trade

Your promotional angles and promotional effort areas are merged in the pyramid on the following page to demonstrate how you should prioritize your overall promotional effort.

Promotional vehicles

If the promotional avenues listed here are the path from your organization, through the media and on to your audience, it would make sense for you to have a vehicle to navigate those paths. You have several – feature/news press releases, filler press releases, public service announcements (PSAs), media advisories, interviews, and posters/flyers.

Start each media contact by knowing exactly what you envision. Not just what the pitch is or why it's relevant to the audience, but what style it will take, what emotions it should evoke, what messages it should convey. This is not so you can lobby a writer to take a certain angle. This is for YOUR benefit, so you can craft the proper pitch that will get the results you envision.

Press Release – Feature/News

Compelling personal story(ies), confrontation, challenge, contrast (rags to riches, black and white, rich and poor - these can be direct or subtle such as “a starving theatre company in the most affluent black county in the country.”) Be forewarned that the some of the best media angles – in the eyes of the media - will not always be positive. Even if they present the theatre company in a positive light, articles that rely on contrast may demean or blatantly offend a person or persons or an organization that is part of the theatre company's community base or support structure. This is why it is extremely important for the company to consider as many angles as possible when making a pitch. Also consider the parties that may be involved - how they view the theatre company, community, patrons and supporters. Don't overlook how potential interviewees view the media either - anyone with a bias against a particular organization or reporter might stir animosity that finds its way into print. They're human too. Remember above all that objective media are NOT your ultimate goal. You want them to see your story your way in as much as that's possible. To accomplish this, you have to see your story THEIR way. It's not a paradox so much as it is an exercise in empathy.

Feature release topic categories:

- Performances
- Performers
- Niche appeal
- Theatre company profile
- Theatre company progress report
- Theatre director profile
- Support focus
- Broadbrush feature - county, region, area. This is not necessarily focused on your organization, but can involve your organization peripherally.

Don't consider all your best items as feature stories. Everything your organization does is not feature material in the eyes of the media and their audience. Even if it were all compelling stuff, any reputable media outlet can't devote an inordinate amount of time or space to one organization or cause unless a publicly-advertised partnership or sponsorship is in effect.

Press Release – Short Filler

So how do you decide between a feature and a short filler when the topics are similar? The feature is planned by you, but written by the media to stand alone and convey and/or evoke an emotional response from the media audience. The short filler is planned and written by you to blend into an existing media component (a section, segment, column, etc.) and fill a defined,

limited time or space purpose in the medium. It's a hybrid between a feature and a PSA, combining some of the detail of the former with all of the information of the latter.

Short Filler Topic categories

- Performances
- Performers
- Sponsors/Supporters

Public Service Announcement (PSA)

A PSA is a simple release that focuses on something of benefit to the public, usually a dated event. These will be used with enormous frequency during your season. Be certain that every PSA actually provides for some “public service” such as informing readers or listeners of an upcoming performance, or announcing auditions.

PSA topic categories

- Performances
- Performers
- Supporters/sponsors
- Workshops
- Fundraisers
- Almost anything time sensitive

Media advisory

A media advisory is an announcement that lets media know of a particular event worthy of their attention. It is usually not intended for public consumption. You'll issue media advisories when you want – and can reasonably expect – a throng of reporters. The key to effective use is reasonable expectation. Given the news-frenzy that is the Washington area, you will have very few events that warrant widespread media advisories. Grand openings, special performances and screenings and special guest visits are appropriate for media advisories.

Interview

Chances are good that you have someone in the organization who would be the perfect interview – bright, relaxed, lucid, humorous, disarming. As a theater organization you probably have several performers who could fill this role. Problem is, you need to get the interview. Simply sending a release and making yourself or someone available doesn't get the job done. And thinking of yourself or your organization as a static interview ready and waiting to happen won't accomplish anything either.

Securing interviews can take a good bit of legwork. Here are some steps to make the process organized and efficient:

- Research your broadcast and print media and see which ones utilize interview formats on a consistent basis. Look for particular programs and hosts to contact with interview ideas.
- Establish a separate media list of interviewers and interview-oriented programs.
- Look at your media angles and topics and establish a priority list by interview appeal.
- Establish a list of your staff, performer and supporter strengths and areas of expertise.
- Match your list of people with your list of topics.
- Pitch your people/topics to selected media based on their needs and formats.

Poster/Flyer/Bulletin Board

Use for performances, auditions and help wanteds; anything that pertains to the public and can be defended as of interest to a community in some way. In other words, don't abuse the privilege of free posting by using bulletin boards for every promotional need you can find. Bulletin boards are true community information posts and the limited space should be respected. View your bulletin board postings as a relationship with the community each board serves and take responsibility for policing your own material – what goes up must come down, so dated information should come down as soon as the event or deadline has passed. And anything that goes up should have any necessary approvals. Remember, you're building relationships with everyone who comes into contact with you, your organization, your people and yes, your materials. While your message may be "Meet the MET," your overall goal is "come support our organization." Don't expect a long-term commitment from the public if you're not conveying your own seriousness about the relationship.

View bulletin board postings as a regular component of your promotional efforts. As such, this should not be a hit-or-miss affair. You need to approach bulletin boards the same way you approach press releases and other more "serious" promotional efforts. Here is a quick outline that will provide structure to bulletin board campaigns:

- Assemble and maintain a list of public bulletin boards in your primary target audience area. A starter list for the MET is included with this document, but this should be seen as (yet another!) work in progress.
- Create a spreadsheet to track your usage of each board. List the board location, owner, manager/contact, board size and sizes of materials accepted. Also include the following fields: item, date posted, approved by, date removed, approximate response.
- Use the spreadsheet to track every single flyer, poster or card that you put on every board.
- To the extent possible, you would also like to track responses from these postings. Simply asking callers how they heard about the MET will give you good feel for how these efforts are working – which boards and which neighborhoods are responsive. This in turn can help guide future cultivation efforts.

Word of mouth/personal contact

You've no doubt heard some twist on the cliché about word of mouth making or breaking a business. While such a statement may be a bit strong, there is a grain of truth that is worth considerable analysis: *People talk*. And because of this fact, people should be seen as endless sources of promotion. Whether you agree with the grapevine or not is irrelevant. It is a tool, just like press releases and posters, though its usage is much less structured. While the grapevine is better suited to selling tickets, you can use the power of informal talk to promote the organization:

- Remind everyone directly involved with the organization to mention the MET and any current production to all of their family, friends and coworkers.
- Ask board members and supporters to carry specific word-of-mouth requests to their business and social circles. Such requests could include attending a show, inquiring about the possibility of discounted group ticket sales, or simply talking about their roles with the organization. Such discussion should naturally lend itself to inquiry about the MET. This is not an effort to sell tickets... your aim is to use any conversational topic you can to spur an interest in learning more about the MET.

The down side

Now for the bad news about media relations - the work-reward equation is unpredictable. Results are never guaranteed and are almost never immediate. Sustained media campaigns are the antibiotics in a complete marketing strategy - they only work in consistent, long-term doses. You can't take one pill and feel better the next day, and you can't send out the perfect press release and expect great coverage right away.

Note that the emphasis throughout this section is not on advertising or marketing. True, media relations are part of marketing and can result in effective advertising. However, since a small theatre company likely does not have skilled media and advertising staff, it will simplify your thinking and your purpose to concentrate on the media strategies here without thinking about how to use the media to get free advertising. Just concentrate on effective media strategies and building relationships; the rest will follow.

A last bit of promotional seasoning...

Your promotional work does not start or stop in perfect step with your performance season. But there can be a bit of extra method to your campaign during the busiest times. Here's a quick glance at how your media-oriented promotional vehicles can be well utilized in relation to your performance season.

Sample of seasonal media promotional efforts

- PSA - announce season schedule
- Feature release - theatre company profile
- Web posting – theater company history and mission
- Feature release - key production
- PSA - announce promotion schedule
- Web link, local and regional arts sites
- Interview, radio – current production
- Feature release - community involvement
- PSA - upcoming promotion
- Feature release - theatre director or key performer(s)
- PSA – new sponsor/supporter recognition
- Short - new sponsors
- PSA - upcoming promotion
- 2-3 Shorts - community workshops/performances
- PSA - fundraiser
- Interview, television – community workshop or performance
- Short – fundraiser
- Short – thank you to patrons and sponsors
- PSA – announce season-end event

Of course you'll want to mix community efforts in here as well – bulletin board items, posters, etc. Keep in mind that while your season will end at some time, your obligation to maintain media contact is all year long. Offseason media efforts could focus on building up to the next season - the planned performances, auditions, strategic partnerships, continued community involvement, traveling theatre, and performances by MET artists with other theatres.

SUPPORT

Identification of needs, roles and opportunities

Any small theatre organization needs a helping hand. In fact, some helping legs, backs, brains, eyes, ears and wallets are a survival necessity. As if enlisting such support wasn't difficult enough, it is paramount that you establish clearly-defined roles for each contributor before making even one call for help. Remember, it is not incumbent upon supporters, sponsors and volunteers to bring organization to the organization. They bring their own special skills, talents and time. You supply the plans, goals, and structure. The better organized you are before enlisting the troops, the better they will perform in battle.

This section provides a basic structure for obtaining and effectively managing support for the MET. This is not a primer on people management; it is assumed that those involved full-time with the organization have the interpersonal skills necessary to establish key relationships, and coordinate and manage people from varied backgrounds with varied interests and motivations.

“Support” means far more than help with tonight's performance. It means establishing and maintaining key personal relationships and business and community partnerships. It means effectively soliciting and managing interns, volunteers and paid staff and consultants. It means presenting the MET as a viable business entity, not just an arts organization, to effectively secure and manage sponsorships, contributions, and donations. And it means juggling all of these things all year long – during the show season and during the off season.

Be fairly open minded in your notion of what constitutes support. And be well aware that support is a two-way street. You naturally want to encourage support from the community. But remember as a community-based organization, you are implicitly expected to provide support to the community. Even if such social pressures are weak or non-existent in your primary target audience, you should adopt this obligation with the understanding that every form of community contact is a potential plus for the organization. Every contact in a socially-redeeming context is an even bigger plus, as it conveys the image of social conscience in your organization.

This section focuses on three main areas of support – business, education and community.

“Support” for purposes of this document means a bilateral relationship with potential benefits to both parties. Three other support areas that will not be presented here are Arts, Government and Individual. Though of obvious importance, these require substantially more time and resources and are not efficient support paths to take in the early stages of establishing the organization.

With every potential support partner, know ahead of time what you want from them and what you can offer in return. Do not approach any organization with the mindset of seeing what they have to offer. It's simply unprofessional. Yes, keep an open mind to new possibilities. But have a basic agenda and stick to it unless and until you see a clear indication it's not working.

Your initial support efforts should be aimed at potential partners that meet these simple yet essential criteria:

- Organizational (not individual)
- Community-based or connected
- Part of, or connected to, your primary target audience
- High public profile
- Distinct network – each support partner should be able to convey your message to, or connect you with, an organization not currently in your support network.

What you want from your partners will depend on the organization. Don't fall into the trap of thinking you'll "take all the help you can get, anywhere you can find it." The better organized you are regarding your support relationships, the more help you will get. Here are some ideas for what you need in each of these areas.

Support the MET needs from Business partners:

Direct Financial – cash, grants, loans (?)

In-kind – administrative help/services/labor, networking, supplies, materials

Intellectual/advisory – advice, consulting, big-picture planning, advisory group participation

Support the MET needs from Education partners:

K-8 – connection to parents, promotional performance venue, profile from being associated with school, group and individual ticket outlet, media angles, talent pool for youth-oriented productions

9-12 – same as above plus critiques, media angles, volunteers/supporters.

Support the MET needs from Community partners:

Civic organizations – access to meetings and members (for promotion), newsletter space, ticket outlets, exposure to community, volunteers/supporters, channels for poster/flyer distribution

Churches – word-of-mouth promotion, promotional performance venue, volunteers/supporters

Libraries – poster and flyer outlet, lecture venue

Service organizations – ticket outlet, promotional performance venue, word-of-mouth promotion, business and community contacts, volunteers/supporters, cash and in-kind contributions and sponsorships, critiques, ideas, presentation venue

In all your efforts to enlist support, never forget that you should be prepared to offer something in return. Never, ever stop thinking about ways the MET can support a business, organization or community, and ways the MET can recognize or benefit those who support it.

MET benefits to supporters:

- Free or discounted tickets – Not a sales effort, but never hesitate to offer free or discounted tickets based on your perceived value of the support you are getting.
- Reserved seating
- Recognition – A powerful ally. You can recognize smaller supporters in programs or flyers. Larger supporters might be considered for sponsorship and regular mention in advertising.
- Access

Business Support

The start-up theatre organization has unlimited resources in its local business community. Your efforts should be concentrated on intellectual/advisory support, direct financial assistance, and sponsorships/in-kind donations. Every business on your contact list should be objectively scrutinized and placed in one or more of these three categories based on their expressed interest, financial size and strength, community involvement, theatre experience and ability and willingness to fill specific roles.

Intellectual/Advisory

Believe it or not, your highest priority in dealing with businesses is not money. By getting the right support partners on board first, you stand a much better chance of securing funding and sponsorships/in-kind donations.

Intellectual/advisory support extends far beyond simply having a corporate head on your board. Every business employs people with a variety of knowledge and skills. These employees and executives don't necessarily need a theatre background to provide you with needed brainpower. Accountants, human resource managers, marketers all have something that the MET can use. Don't forget the facilities, custodial and physical plant workers who can even play an intellectual part in theatre operations. Perhaps an experienced custodial/maintenance person could advise on better light bulb choices or electrical changes to help elsewhere. Worthwhile set design and operation tips could come from construction workers. These things may seem trivial or downright unimportant. But even if you don't need such participation, by inviting it you encourage more interest in, and more support for, the theatre. When all is said and done, isn't that what you need more than anything?

A business advisory group can help you match needs with resources, and can provide guidance in all facets of running the MET as a business. A business advisory group does not have to meet regularly. In fact, they never have to meet at all if they don't want to. They can be a group in name only – a list of business leaders, with basic information about their skills and expertise. All you want is their nod to contact them on occasion for advice on MET-related matters. Forming such a list should not be difficult if you can convey the very limited time commitment and the fact that any full advisory group meetings would be entirely optional. Indeed, this could be seen as a feather for some business leaders and employees, especially those in small companies or with small businesses of their own.

Your first step in forming a business advisory group is to look carefully at your own organization and determine as objectively as possible where you could use strategic help and specialized knowledge. Have your board of directors involved in discussions about the organization's needs, its current strengths and weaknesses, and the goals and objectives for the foreseeable future. Below is a basic list. Note that just because you can list a need does not mean you have to fill it in short order. Focus on getting the right person involved in the right area by looking at the business they are in, and asking about their personal and professional backgrounds and interests. Don't forget to make the MET work for them as well. Offer tickets and recognition as appropriate.

Basic needs from business advisory group members:

- Strategic planning and partnerships
- Financial advice and planning
- Marketing guidance
- Ticket price and discount offer feedback and planning
- Technical and production feedback
- Concession and box office advice

Your list should mirror this to start, and grow based on specific and anticipated needs. You're not actually soliciting labor for these items here, though you will certainly do that in time. This is simply a vehicle for surrounding the organization with a specific talent pool.

Once you know what you need, look at your list of area businesses and contacts (see appendix). Try to match needs with specific organizations and, to the extent possible, executives and employees within these organizations. Don't be overly concerned with the prestige of a big name; this is a functional body of knowledge, not an executive board to lend their names and egos. Find people who are genuinely enthused about what they do and who express a strong interest in lending their expertise.

With so many needs, you'll likely be receiving far more from certain organizations than you could ever give. Though this does not have to be viewed as a barter process, you'll still want to trumpet what the MET can offer in return for an organization's support.

Direct financial

Nothing boosts a small theatre company's morale like an infusion of cash. With sufficient money come the resources every theatre organization craves. With ample funding, many pesky details can be taken care of to allow the performers, producers and directors to spread their wings and attempt productions previously thought impossible.

A list of sizeable businesses in your immediate area can be found in the appendix. As with all spreadsheets and databases, this is certainly not a finite list. Add to it.

Your task in enlisting direct financial support does not involve simply asking everyone on the list for a contribution. Your goal is to get as much money as possible from as few sources as possible, so a blanket begging campaign is not the answer. The direct and indirect costs associated with soliciting small contributions are astronomical. Each business has to be re-contacted every year; the paperwork is enormous and there are business competition possibilities to complicate your relationships. These are not insurmountable obstacles; they are simply too big for the small theatre company to manage effectively in the beginning.

Sort your business list by ground zero parameters – distance or zip code. You'll have to do a little investigative work to determine the structure and hierarchy of each company, but any library will have such information readily available. This is another area where you should consider strategic partnerships with administrative or marketing firms, or even local associations such as the Chamber of Commerce. In approaching such firms, indicate that you are merely seeking guidance in contacting local businesses and organizations. You will not be privy to proprietary database information, but these organizations will likely have their hands on sufficient public data, saving you time.

Sponsorship/In-kind

Every business likely has something to offer the MET in terms of in-kind support. Retailers and restaurants can provide merchandise to sponsor MET events and promotions. But there's much more than merchandise. Using the following list as an example, create a spreadsheet that matches workplace skills and merchandise with MET needs.

Specific services/supplies available from business support partners:

- Temp firms – database and spreadsheet creation and maintenance, sales calls, tracking of filled seats for each performance, box office administration help, general administrative labor
- Restaurants – food and beverage for promotions and special events, catering for VIP support events and meetings
- Mass retailers – giveaways (sponsorship) for promotions.
- Office supply houses – administrative needs (pens, paper, ink cartridges, copying services, laminating)
- Security agencies – crowd control, ingress and egress logistics and security
- Accounting firms – sales analysis, ticket pricing formulas
- Carpentry/construction firms – set design advice and labor
- Landscaping services – flowers and greenery for stage and lobby areas

Education

Support from the educational community should come primarily in the form of working partnerships that provide mutual benefits for the MET and each school partner. The MET should adopt separate offerings for grades K-8 and 9-12. These partnerships will be more give than take for the MET, but that is fine as the goal here is indirect exposure. By establishing a regular presence in many of the area's schools, you establish indirect links with thousands of parents, and their friends, neighbors and co-workers.

Work with classroom teachers and regional staff to develop MET-oriented curricula. This does not mean curriculum that is MET-specific; rather, it means lessons that are discipline-specific and can be related to the MET or the arts in general. This is surprisingly more plausible than it may first seem. Consider the following simple curriculum ideas:

History

- History of the MET
- History of theater in Prince George's County
- The history of African American theater organizations

Arts

- Acting
- Elementary production techniques
- How does a theater work?

Social Studies

- African American performers
- Cultural identities in theater characters
- Why do we need theater?

Some of these may be a bit “heavy” for young audiences. You’ll want to work with specific teachers to develop appropriate lessons and classroom presentations for the age groups. You’re more likely to simply read or present theater-related stories to the very young audiences, while the cultural, historical and technical elements may take root in grades five through eight, when students are more apt to understand and possibly have an interest in the theater.

Approach all schools the same way. Your first point of contact should be the school system’s primary offices, perhaps the communications/outreach department. Know where you want to go prior to making this first contact – you’re looking to bring the MET into classrooms, to share the theater and contribute the organization’s historical, cultural and artistic elements into classroom instruction if teachers are interested. Do not come prepared with your own lesson plans unless asked by the school or teacher to do so. Generally speaking, your goal is to work with the classroom teachers and instructional designers in developing appropriate lessons so you can offer something more than a show-and-tell visit.

After contacting the main offices, let them know you have a list of schools close to the college that you’d like to visit. Ask for the name of the principal at each school, then contact that person and inform him/her of your desire to work with the school. Ask to speak with an instructional liaison (if appropriate) and ask the principal for teacher recommendations – you want to work with those who would be most receptive to your organization, but you also want teachers who are considered experts in lesson planning for your primary disciplines – history, art, social studies.

The appendix includes a list of public schools in Prince George’s County. Limited time and resources make it unlikely that you’ll be able to get to all of them, let alone any private schools in the area.

Special partnerships

Prince George’s County Public Schools has two schools - Thomas Pullen Middle and Suitland High - that specialize in performing arts education. Both should be sought as special working partners and arrangements should be made to provide for extra involvement of these students and teachers with the MET. The Suitland High School Visual and Performing Arts program has well-established partnerships with the Kennedy Center and the Dance Theater of Harlem. Students at Suitland benefit from the advice and direction of professional performers at these venues. Some are even fortunate and talented enough to perform in Dance Theater or Kennedy Center productions. While the MET will obviously not be able to compete with such names, there is no reason NOT to have a transitional venue available to students, especially one close to home that reflects the cultural diversity found in the county’s public school population. The MET needs to evaluate what both of these schools are accomplishing, and propose a brief plan to add value to existing programs. The MET director should arrange a meeting with school principals and performing arts program lead staff. The purpose of this first engagement should be solely to gather information on the schools’ performing arts components and examine ways the MET could fill any voids. Plan on leaving this meeting with concrete theater-oriented needs from the schools. Your job will then be to look at your resources (objectively) and formulate a concise partnership plan wherein these schools gain special access to MET performances and practices, and receive any classroom-based theater instruction and advice you can offer

Community

Civic organizations

There probably isn't one civic or homeowners association in the primary target area that has the ability to markedly influence MET affairs. But collectively, these groups of community activists can prove a powerful tool in your efforts to gain community support and recognition. By making the rounds to enough civic groups, you can assure yourself of having an ally or two in every single community in your primary target area.

You'll want to maintain a list of all civic, citizens homeowners and condo associations in the county. Include the primary contact, meeting date and time, and note which ones have regular newsletters. Your goal is to publish MET information in every single community newsletter. In return, if there is not a charge for this, you can treat a civic association much like a school or business partner and offer discounted tickets and special promotions as resources allow.

Churches

Churches can serve as your best grapevine, so you'll want at least one point person in as many churches as possible. You don't actually have to make a presentation to these groups, just have someone reliable who give performance reminders and coordinate a church group trip to the theater or group ticket sales as outlined previously in the document.

Libraries

All local libraries should be considered partners in your flyer/bulletin board efforts. You should have no problem leaving materials or posting on boards; just be sure to seek approval and take responsibility for the condition and prompt removal of all your materials.

Service and professional organizations

Most meet weekly, biweekly or monthly, and have guest speakers on their agendas. Some, such as Rotary, are white-collar business focused and should be considered the highest priority contacts. Many effective business partnerships will spring from presentations or even visits as a guest. There is a nominal cost associated with most club meetings. Organizations may be able to provide a local or district directory of all their affiliated clubs and members. Again, Rotary is a good example. Their District 7620 encompasses much of the Baltimore-Washington corridor.

Service and professional organizations include:

- Rotary
- Lions
- Knights of Columbus (denominational)
- Toastmasters
- Business and Professional Women
- Kiwanis
- Ruritan
- Scouting organizations

No matter which organizations you contact, be clear in your purpose and understand their requirements ahead of time. You're looking for ongoing support, not just an outlet for quick ticket sales.

How to approach service and professional organizations...

Research each organization so you understand their mission, purpose, customs and expectations, then contact a local chapter or branch. Introduce yourself and explain that you would like to address the group and inform them about the MET - its history, offerings, needs and opportunities.

Prepare a presentation that respects the group's time constraints. Here's a quick sample flow for a presentation

- I'm here to tell you about an exciting new theatre company in Prince George's County...
- This is how and why the MET is here...
- This is what the MET is all about... (mission, goals)
- This is why we're different and unique to Prince George's County...
- This is the opportunity we have...
- We've gotten excellent reviews already (cite reviews)...
- Above all, we are a *community* theatre – one that will be working with and in our communities.
- Here are some of the ways we will be doing this (school presentations, acting classes, community workshops, etc.)...
- We have regional and national goals as well – we hope to put Prince George's County and Prince George's Community College on the national theatre map. Here are some of those big goals and this is what we have to do to achieve them...
- And these are some of the benefits to the community if we meet those goals....
- Of course, we can't get there without a strong commitment from our communities. So we'd love for you to come out and support the MET – here are some of the ways you can do this...

Promotional Priorities Pyramid

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The promotional priorities pyramid is an outline for your promotional efforts. Your goal in following this guide is to learn how to pitch your organization to different media outlets and community resources without wasting your time or sacrificing your credibility by sending inappropriate items to your promotional (media) partners.

Four levels of the pyramid indicate areas of promotional effort for the MET

Items listed (in no particular order) are angles for media and community promotion.

Every promotional topic for media consumption will fall under at least one of these angles. Match each promotional effort with the media and community outlets that correspond to the areas listed here (see media resource list in appendix).

Promotional efforts start at the bottom. Some angles are media appropriate, others are categories for specific topic pitches.

Contact media and community resources for all areas in which each angle appears.

Angles can be combined for background, i.e., some degree of MET History can be included in almost any media contact.

