

The Small Theater Growth & Development Field Manual

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Also available as a [Kindle-compatible ebook](#)

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What You're Getting Into

I love theater. I grew up in NYC going to the theater, I played in my first pit in seventh grade, and as an "adult" I've done a fair amount of Music Director work in the Bay Area, mostly for small nonprofit theaters. From 2005-2013, I served on the Board of Directors of Altarena Playhouse in the Bay Area, and learned much about "the business of show" as it applies to small nonprofit theaters. I've also served (and continue to serve) as both formal and informal advisor to many other small theaters, as well as being an ardent supporter and subscriber of many of them, and I recently joined the Board of Directors of Theatre Bay Area, a 501(c)(3) performing arts advocacy group in the Bay Area.

It's no revelation that the economic environment for the arts has never been great, but for small theaters I think it's particularly tough. There are lots of volunteers, yet there always seems to be a shortage of manpower; in part because the tasks involved often require specialized skills, continuity of commitment, or supervision/coordination. There are lots of audiences out there, but also lots of competition for eyeballs, so getting butts in seats is a never-ending endeavor. Most theaters with budgets under \$500k/year already [rely on fundraising for 50% or more of their income](#), so raising money is high on everyone's agenda and cash is precious, but with so many arts organizations clamoring for money it can be difficult to be heard. And in all these categories, there are seemingly so many "opportunities"—grant programs, publicity channels, discount-ticket outlets, "free" advertising—that it's easy to get carried away only to realize you've now taken on *even more* work for which you have insufficient manpower.

What we learned at Altarena—which allowed us to more than double the theater's subscriber base, get the organization back on sound financial footing, and improve the artistic quality along the way—can be summarized in one sentence: *don't just sell tickets; develop your audience*. To mangle and paraphrase the old saw about teaching a man to fish: "Sell a ticket and you've got a patron for a show; sell a subscription and you've got a patron for the season; bring the subscriber into the family as a donor and you've got a supporter for life." Here's how we did it:

1. Use your best patrons to help you understand your "brand"—what it is you do differently (and/or better than) other comparable theaters that keeps people coming back. *This step is really important because otherwise you'll waste time, money, and effort courting the wrong people.*
2. Use that information to run a targeted subscription campaign. Then identify every opportunity to make those subscribers feel like they're the most important patrons you have—because they are. (In particular, don't make them feel like suckers because you start papering the house for every show.)
3. When new patrons come in, whether through discounts, comps, visiting with a friend, or whatever, identify them as newcomers, welcome them warmly, and stay in touch with them to move them along the "patron lifecycle"—that wonderful process by which a new patron eventually becomes a subscriber, donor, and maybe even a Board member.
4. If you're fundraising, understand what your strategic goals are, how realistic they are, and what you can realistically expect from different strata of your donor base.
5. All the while, *carefully* keep the publicity drum beating so you stay on your patrons' radar between productions or between seasons.

What you can expect if you keep reading is some details about what in my considered opinion we did right (and wrong) in the process of making all of that happen, in the hope that it might be useful to you.

Of course, all opinions about rightness and wrongness are my own—I don't speak for any theater, or for anyone other than myself!

The Importance of Repeatable Processes

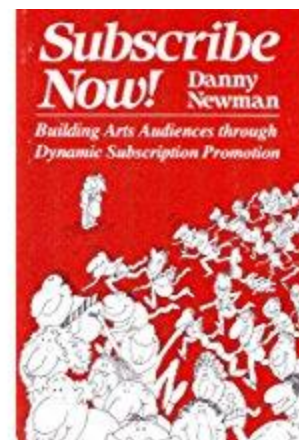
My world is the world of software engineering. In that world, the main difference between mature/successful software companies and immature/less-successful ones is *not* necessarily that the successful ones employ better programmers (though that is certainly important): it's that the successful ones have better *processes* in place, allowing successful projects to be reliably repeated and allowing processes to change when they fail the project.

Any small business is no different. Small theaters need a documented process and timeline for subscription campaigns; for publicizing and selling a regular production; for publicizing and selling a special event; for organizing a fundraiser or "friendraiser"; for rotating your Web site's front page as productions change; for keeping up a regular drumbeat of email to your subscribers between productions; and so on.

A process implies an owner who can oversee and supervise it. ***While volunteers are great, someone needs to be invested as the designated person who runs these processes.*** Put another way, good volunteers are directable, but they need a director. If the director is also a volunteer, that's great, but they must understand their heavier responsibility compared to (say) volunteer ushers, stage hands, and so on. The same is true for grant writing, marketing, etc.: consultants can help, but *only your people can own the solution*. If you have only one paid staff member working for your theater, my view is that that person's role should be something like "Director of Patron Services" (or of Patron Development) to emphasize the patron-facing nature of all they do.

Subscribe Now!

In the mid-2000s [Altarena Playhouse](#) was looking to shore up the theater's operations and reinvigorate its aging and shrinking subscriber base. Altarena is very strongly a "community" theater: it has been in Alameda, CA, for over 75 years, and many subscribers had been with the theater for decades. When I joined the Board in 2005, the subscriber base had eroded from a high of around 700 to a low of less than half that. Subscribers were aging out and not being supplemented by younger theatergoers, and the theater had acquired a reputation as the kind of place whose material appealed solely to the older generation and whose lobby décor was correspondingly dated and amateur.



For inspiration, I read Danny Newman's classic book [Subscribe Now!](#) Mr. Newman is on a mission from God to get more theaters to be able to rely more heavily on their subscribers for both revenue and seat-filling/word-of-mouth. A few aspects of the book are dated (first edition was 1977) but I've tried to summarize the most valuable bits of advice here so you don't have to read the whole thing (though its writing style is fun to read).

The premise is simple: there are two kinds of theater patrons—subscribers and everyone else.

- Subscribers have shown their faith in the theater by paying in advance for shows they may not even have heard of. They like to feel like they made the right choice by supporting you.

- Subscribers give you an early-in-the-season cash injection that helps finance the season's expenses.
- Subscribers are guaranteed to fill a certain percentage of seats, and will often bring friends.
- Subscribers have prepaid to attend every production (not just cherry-picked the ones they've heard of), so over time they'll become more appreciative and discriminating theatergoers, and will feel even more invested as "inner circle" patrons.
- Subscribers spend more time at the theater, so they will also become familiar with your economic situation, and will be ready to cultivate as donors.

In short, you must do everything you can to upsell faithless, fickle single-ticket buyers to angelic, steadfast subscribers. Mr. Newman is unwavering in his conviction about the sharpness of this distinction.

Mythbusting subscription campaigns

Newman starts out by making the case for *why* subscribers are worth your time and effort to obtain:

Myth: You shouldn't sell too many subscriptions—you'll anger single-ticket buyers when they can't get tickets, and they'll eventually stop coming to your shows. **Reality:** In 2017, SHN SF sold a ton of subscriptions by making clear that *Hamilton* tickets would be made available to subscribers first. It worked.

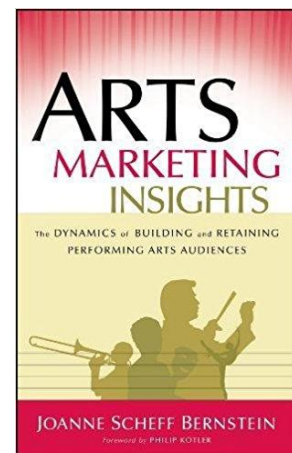
Myth: Subscribers cost us money because they pay less per show than single-ticket buyers. **Reality:** Once the curtain rises, any empty seats have *zero* revenue potential. The real number you care about is *revenue per seat after the season is over*, and subscribers have prepaid for their seats whether they use them or not. Exercise: taking into account pro comps, cast discounts, papering the house, and half-price sales through discount outlets, what was *your* theater's earned revenue per seat last season?

Myth: Subscribers won't sign up if they don't know every show in the season, and/or we're beholden to them to do particular kinds of programming. **Reality:** Subscribers don't think in terms of hits and flops but rather good and bad seasons. If the season overall was good, they'll forgive one production whose material they didn't like. And as you'll learn in the next section, [most people already don't like your work](#).

Myth: If we have lots of publicity/visibility, we don't need to rely as heavily on subscribers. **Reality:** No amount of bumper stickers on cars with the theater's logo, or placement/advertising at public events, translates directly to butts in seats *and financial sustainability*. Subscriptions do.

Myth: If we don't have enough subscribers, we can always fill seats by offering last-minute discounts. **Reality:** this is a path to becoming [overly reliant on discount-ticketing channels](#), and in addition, many studies have found that this strategy attracts *people who want things cheap, rather than people who are interested in theater and likely to be repeat customers*. Discount channels can be a powerful tool but are also easily misused. Later we'll address how to avoid such misuses, and how to [avoid discount channels that target the wrong audience](#).

Newman's book was originally written for audiences of the 1980s; are subscriptions still a good fit for today's instant-gratification, get-it-now-on-your-phone, don't-plan-ahead audiences? Joanne Scheff Bernstein's book [Arts Marketing Insights](#) argues that they're not, and she quotes some studies to support her argument. Whether the studies are representative of *your* theater and audience may vary, but here's my take on her objections:



Objection: Up-front subscription is a cost to the patron with limited benefits; most subscribers state that the guarantee of good seats, not the discount, is the most important reason they renew.

My reaction: Even if your theater offers only general seating, many other benefits can apply: free cancellations/exchanges, a free glass of wine at intermission, access to particular lounge areas at the theater, invitations to play readings, and various other perks we list below. Reach out to local businesses—for example, nearby restaurants—and suggest cross-promotion, such as a discount for your subscribers in exchange for ad space in the playbill or on the theater’s website. For example, Altarena Playhouse subscribers get [10% off dinner on show nights at participating local restaurants](#); the restaurants get free ads in the show’s program and on the theater’s website, and the theater gets another perk it can offer to subscribers. It’s an inexpensive way to make a patron feel they’re part of the VIP circle.

Objection: Younger audiences are accustomed to last-minute planning and instant gratification, and are unlikely to make plans in advance.

My reaction: Assuming your ticketing system supports it, simply don’t require patrons to pick all their show dates in advance, and make it easy (and free) for them to change or cancel subscriber reservations without waiting on the phone or playing voicemail tag. Altarena’s subscribers can choose dates at any time, and cancel/change for free up to 2 hours before curtain. The ticketing system even reminds subscribers when a production is closing and they have no reservation for it.

Objection: Your programming will become beholden to keeping your subscribers happy.

My reaction: If you are following Newman’s advice and using your subscription as a way to *develop* your audience as well as attract them—and this includes constantly refreshing your audience with new blood—this shouldn’t be a problem. Altarena started introducing shows into its subscriptions that weren’t favorites among some older subscribers. But they had attracted enough younger subscribers to more than make up the difference, and producing those shows broadened the theater’s appeal by putting it on the map for younger patrons, some of whom eventually became subscribers too.

Objection: People who aren’t hardcore theatergoers may be reluctant to allocate multiple nights in a year to a single theater.

My reaction: Many people who can afford to eat anywhere have a favorite restaurant they return to over and over. If a theater is convenient to where you live, makes you feel at home because you know the staff and you regularly run into other patrons there and develop a friendship with them, and you enjoy their programming and production values, why *wouldn’t* you go there five or six nights each year, especially if they go out of their way to treat subscribers particularly well?

Bernstein suggests that theaters should be prepared to rely more on nonsubscribers to fill seats. She suggests strategies for “mini” or “flex” subscriptions that don’t represent as much of a commitment as a full series, or that allow patrons to “create their own” series (although I [argue against this](#) for community theaters that do just a few productions per year and are actively trying to develop their audiences). She also suggests the concept of “membership,” that is, paying an annual fee that doesn’t by itself translate to seats but gives you the right to buy tickets at a discount during the season—a strange recommendation given her evidence that discount pricing is *not* a major driver of subscription sales. (And if patrons aren’t willing to pay up front for a subscription that concretely includes a bunch of tickets, why would they pay somewhat less up front to get a benefit they may or may not ever use?) She argues that “membership” gives the patron a “sense of belonging” that may translate to greater loyalty or affinity or goodwill for the theater, but there are better ways to do that

in my opinion; and having read Putnam's brilliant but bleak *Bowling Alone*, I'm skeptical of this whole argument. *In short, don't think of subscriptions as entirely transactional. There have to be some less-tangible bits of goodwill and patron development in there as well.*

Marketing costs per seat filled are significantly higher for single ticket sales than subscribers. And that's not even counting the fact that when subscribers bring their friends, even if their friends never upgrade to a subscription, you got free word-of-mouth advertising that turned into a sale and probably sold a few more glasses of wine. Having read both Bernstein's and Newman's books, plus the weighty tome [*Standing Room Only*](#), I'd still double down on Newman's approach and focus on subscriptions.

Lastly, just as with donation drives, present subscriptions as an *opportunity* and not as begging. "We will go under without your subscription support" is an invitation to throw good money after bad. "Get front-row access and other perks at an amazing price, while supporting professional quality theater in Your Town USA" sends a very different message.

Friendraisers (or: Who loves you? Not most people.)

There's one more myth that goes like this: "There's too much competition for the same eyeballs because there are too many theaters close to ours."

To see why this doesn't apply, consider the following painful truth:

Most people don't like what your theater does.

That is: most people aren't theatergoers, period, and unless all you do is *Mamma Mia* year after year, most of those people probably don't like what you do. (And maybe not even then. In fact, probably not.) And among those who *are* theatergoers, most of them probably have no specific affinity for your programming.

Somewhere in the arts marketing literature I inhaled was an anecdote about how a certain car company surveyed its customers about a particular truck model. 80% of their customers hated it, but the 20% who liked it really *loved* it and wanted to have its children.

By analogy, I don't buy the argument that just because there are so many small theaters near you, there is too much competition. That would be true if all those theaters offered substantially the *same* product at comparable prices. If there's something your theater does differently and/or better than others *in the eyes of your patrons*, your product is different. And if no one else offers *that* product as well as you, you're golden.

That differentiating thing can be elusive to identify. Sometimes it's the choice of material: focusing on particular societal issues, themes, story tropes, and so on can attract specific audiences. But sometimes it's not just the choice of material: Altarena has done (and continues to do) many "old chestnuts" like *Cabaret* and *Death of a Salesman*, but patrons told us the intimacy of the space and the directorial choices that exploit that intimacy distinguish our productions of those well-explored shows. And beyond the performance itself, patrons told us there was a "neighborhood feel" to hanging out in the theater, which kept them coming back.

The key phrase is "patrons told us". As part of our renewed drive to gain and retain subscribers, we started doing something new: we identified "star patrons"—longtime subscribers, key donors, patrons who are also performers—this assumes you're using a ticketing/CRM system that makes it easy to do this. We started inviting them to the theater after hours, one-on-one or in groups of two or three at most, to have some wine

and cheese (total cost: less than \$50 per occasion for a couple of bottles of wine and an antipasto tray) and just tell us their thoughts on what they liked about the theater and what we could be doing better. We originally thought about having these meetings in a nicer location—say, a local restaurant or bar—especially because between shows the theater lobby would be full of set-building materials, costume racks, etc. But, mindful of the earlier feedback that patrons enjoyed feeling like they were "part of a family" when they entered the theater, we decided to have them in the theater lobby after all—indeed, we even had to have one of them in a dressing room because the lobby and stage were full of auditioners that night! But in the end, I think it was the right thing to do because inviting those patrons to spend time in the space as "collaborators" and not just as paying customers—even going backstage, where normally only the actors can go and where the décor is nonexistent—made them feel even more invested in the theater, despite (or because of?) the austerity of the surroundings.

I've become a big fan of these "friendraiser" events. They cost little (but they do cost *something*, so think of it as an investment in your own patrons) and have big payback potential. Since I'm an engineer, here's my tabular representation of your patron base and how it relates to "friendraising":

	Might like your work	Don't like your work
Have heard of you	<i>Invite to friendraisers; target for promotions</i>	Cut your losses
Haven't heard of you	Identify wide-access outreach channels like Goldstar, partner marketing, etc.	How do they know they don't like your work? Maybe a free ticket to a show will change their mind.

The top-left quadrant are your high value customers. Even if they're not subscribers, maybe they've purchased single tickets for a lot of shows recently, or maybe they've received comps or discount tickets through outlets like [Goldstar](#). (Price doesn't matter at this point: discount tickets are probably available to lots of shows, but they picked yours.) Or maybe they attend only 1 or 2 shows a year but they also donate. Use your CRM system to mine your patron records for these people, so you can get them into a room, get a couple of glasses of wine into them, and ask "Why do you like us?" You may be surprised at how much they can tell you about why you are so great (and how you could improve), and how much that can help shape your brand and messaging to attract others who will feel the same way.

Subscribers aren't free

Taking Newman's advice to heart for developing a subscriber base, one of the first things we did was to spend the money and time to overhaul or season brochure, making it *so good* that we were proud, even eager, to hand them out wherever possible. I carried some to work every day. We distributed them to other theaters, local businesses, libraries, senior centers, civic groups, churches. We budgeted for multiple mailings, including one that put the brochure in an envelope with a letter personally signed by the Artistic Director and a followup (if needed) of the "bare" brochure, which was designed as a self-mailing piece.

The subscriber brochure is worth investing in: for many prospective subscribers it's the first and only collateral piece they'll see, and they'll judge the theater by it. It should be concise, attractively presented, and have a clear message: **Subscribe Now!** It should come with an attractive cover letter printed on a high-quality printer using the theater's (color) letterhead. This is not the place to cut corners on presentation. (Nonprofits can save some money by getting a bulk mail permit.) You can also create a "tri-fold" self-mailer on standard letter size paper, but then you can't enclose that letter from the Artistic Director or Executive Director—in that case a short note with the AD's photo and scanned signature inside the brochure can suffice.

Have you visited any irritating restaurant websites that hit you with "telling the story of the restaurant", when what you really want to know is "What's on the menu, and can I make a reservation"? The subscription brochure's message should be *why the patron wants to subscribe*. I'm amazed how many theaters cannot resist the temptation to make the brochure about themselves, or get hung up on principles such as "great art sells itself," or seem more invested in the "image" of the theater and the integrity of getting that image on every subscription collateral. Nope. You are here to *sell subscriptions*, so the call to action should be unambiguous and obstacle-free: **Subscribe Now!** To make it easy to do so, the brochure should provide *multiple options* for subscribing now:

1. Online with a credit card: the brochure includes an easy-to-follow link (e.g. my-theater.org/subscribe) to a pre-populated page for buying a subscription, so the patron doesn't have to click around searching for it on the site. You can even include a shortlink or a QR code, assuming your theater's subscription purchase page is mobile-friendly.
2. Mail-in: the brochure has a tear-off panel to fill out and mail with a check.
3. By phone: a clearly-indicated number to get help from the box office, even if it's just detailed instructions on how to leave a message with all necessary info to close the sale.

In volume, it costs about a dollar to print and mail a brochure (exclusive of design expenses, but hopefully you can get a friend of the theater who's good at graphic design to give you a break on that). Emails by themselves don't work, but an email pitch that comes *after* the brochure mailing can work as a reminder of that brochure they stuck to the fridge while deciding whether to subscribe. We'll return to that in the campaign schedule below.

Even a beautiful brochure won't be read the first time by most people. Plan on doing waves of mailings—maybe once a month or once every 3 weeks during pre-season—and plan on sending more than 1 copy of the brochure per household. (As subscriptions come in, you can generate custom reports that omit people who've already subscribed.) A rule of thumb in marketing is that people need to hear a message five to seven times before they act on it. If you're doing a combination of email and US mail, carefully schedule and time these to alternate presentations and hit each prospect multiple times.

And even if you mail 4 separate paper copies and intervening emails to a patron to hook them, and maybe even call them as a follow-up, you've still spent less than \$5 to acquire that customer (even less if the household buys more than 1 subscription). Not bad for building your foundation and your base.

The fulfillment mailing should go out as soon as practical, and should be beautiful. Include a letter signed *personally* by the artistic director; 1000 letters can be hand-signed in under an hour, and if you have an hour and a half, each can include a one-line comment to the customer if the AD knows them personally. The letter should *first congratulate* the patron on their excellent artistic taste in choosing to sign up so they can get in on the ground floor of what is sure to be a great season, *and then thank* them for their support, acknowledging that they're now part of a special "inner circle" on whom the theater is so reliant, the bedrock of the

enterprise. If there are credentials that grant preferential access to seating, or serve as an identifier for discounts at local businesses, make sure you include them.

Include a copy of the brochure. Yes, they got one as part of the signup/renewal drive, but you can't miss an opportunity to remind them what great shows are coming up this season, and just maybe they'll pass the brochure on to a friend.

My opinion: Don't give subscriptions away for free as a prize or thank-you. The iPod was one of the best-selling personal electronic devices ever, yet Apple never gave any away. Giving something away sends the message that it has little value. Instead, give away single tickets, and then offer the lucky winners the chance to apply the face value of the single tickets to upgrade to a subscription. Or offer the subscription itself at a deep discount, say half price or even better, during one-time promos. But the subscription itself is valuable, so in my humble opinion it should *never be free*. An inexpensive subscription can lead to reaction of "Wow, I can't believe what a great deal this is!" whereas a free subscription can lead to "Well, if they're willing to give it away, they must be desperate for subscribers, or their programming must not be very good."

Exercise: visit the websites of theaters with strong subscriber bases and see what they're offering their subscribers, how prominently the "Subscribe Now" messaging is featured on their sites, and how the subscriber experience in-theater differs from the nonsubscriber experience. During a visit to a performance there, how many times and in how many different ways do you get the message "Subscribe Now" from the theater?

Set targets and track them

How many new subscribers do you want to sign up? What percent of existing subscribers do you want to renew? Does your ticketing/CRM system make it easy to check how close you are to meeting those goals? Chapter 5 of Newman's book has a comprehensive example table summarizing possible goals of a campaign. Here's an adapted summary of some of the possible campaign items, though not all items will be appropriate for all theaters. Importantly, each item has a target sales figure, so at the end of the campaign you can determine which ones were most effective.

Total subscriptions available to sell: 1000 (*an aggressive value for this number would be the number of subscriptions needed to fill 75% of your seats for the season.*)

Component	Description of target	Goal
Renewal with early bird discount	Renew 70% of current subscribers. Consider offering "early bird" discount if they renew before "official" subscription campaign begins. According to Arts Marketing Insights , historically 50% of first-time subscribers renew, 80% of two-year subscribers renew, and 90% of longer-term subscribers renew, so 70% is a reasonable balanced average if you have a 3+ year subscriber history.	560
Convert single-ticket buyers	Identify top 5% of single-ticket buyers from previous season(s) and upsell them to 2 subscriptions each. (Assuming ~500 single-ticket buyers last season) "We noticed you attended 3 of our shows last year. Did you know that for the same price, you could be a subscriber this season and attend all 5 shows, plus get a bunch of other benefits?"	25

Renew lapsed subscribers	Find top 25 people who had previously subscribed but didn't renew last season. Re-enroll them, with personal outreach/special offer if necessary: call or email them <i>individually</i> (not a form letter or mass email) and ask what might entice them to return to the fold. If it seems you can get them back, make them an offer they can't refuse. The net future value of a subscriber is worth it even if you feel you're taking a bath on the special offer.	25
Referral by existing subscribers	Recruit top 20 current subscribers (some of whom may also be Board members, producers, sponsors, etc) to sell 4 subscriptions each, by pressing the flesh in any way necessary; find an appropriate incentive (VIP event, "gold" subscriber privileges at shows, etc)	80
Cocktail parties	Host a "friendraiser" event and invite your best nonsubscriber patrons. Give them an incentive to subscribe on-the-spot, maybe a token discount. Be sure to have ways they can easily pay (Square credit card reader, e.g.) since most people don't carry checks or a lot of cash.	20
Block sales	Sell a block of subscriptions at a discounted rate to neighborhood organizations, civic groups, etc.	20
Board referral	Get 5 Board members to write personal letters to 100 friends each; expect 5% return on subscription sales	25
Commission	Offer neighborhood/civic/church groups, student groups, service organizations, etc. the opportunity to sell subscriptions on commission. E.g. allow seller to keep 15-20% of subscription price. Remember, once you have the subscriber, they are yours to lose at renewal time.	100
Student discount	Advertise through music/theater teachers in local high schools and colleges to sell deeply discounted student subscriptions. (Be sure to state that student ID will be checked, even if you don't really intend to do so, to prevent misuse of this by the unscrupulous few.)	20
Direct mail phase 1	Email to entire patron list (assume 2000 names, 0.5% yield)	10
Direct mail phase 2	Season brochures mailed to direct mailing list (2000 names, 2% yield)	40
Direct mail phase 3	Email reminder followup to everyone who hasn't responded in phases 1 or 2 (1% yield)	20
Single ticket upsell	During curtain speech of first production of season, offer single ticket buyers the option to upgrade to a subscription by paying the difference—have forms ready to fill out with space for credit card info or allow payment at box office.	50

Many Ways to Package...but Develop Your Audience

Initially it may be important to offer a “subscriber product” (something that makes you part of the “subscriber family”) at various price points. For example, you could offer subscriptions valid only during previews or only at matinees, etc. These folks still get the same benefits subscribers get, but can only attend certain performances. (But keep it simple; experience suggests patrons can be overwhelmed by too many choices.)

However, I recommend you *don't* provide “subscriptions” that are so flexible they allow all the subscription vouchers to be used for one production. That's not a subscription; that's a discount. A subscription also develops the patron's taste and knowledge of theater, provides a solid base of sold seats even for more daring productions, and gives both the patron and the theater a sense of continuity as they see each other regularly several times each season. A “flex subscription” that allows using all of the vouchers for one show accomplishes none of these.

Note that many of these campaign strategies require support from your customer relationship management software. For example, identifying your “best prospects” from among current nonsubscribers means you have to be able to mine the data to find repeat visitors; emailing or generating mailing labels for your entire patron list can either be a 1-click operation or a nightmare; and so on. Use software that helps you develop the audience base.

Newman strongly recommends deeply-discounted student subscriptions over “student rush” lotteries (and I agree) because subscriptions make students first-class customers, and gets them accustomed to paying to support the arts. “Rush” is a cattle call that pits them *against* each other to compete for a limited number of cheap seats. The messaging is very different. If you message to students through local arts teachers, send the message that you want to include them as first-class citizens in your theatrical community, and that you want to treat them with the respect and esteem they deserve as sophisticated arts patrons, rather than the message that you are throwing them a bone because they have less disposable income than adults.

Example of a Successful Campaign Brochure

At Altarena, we followed closely the advice in Danny Newman's *Subscribe Now!* that “the main instrument of your campaign is the brochure.” Working with the great folks at [Cairdea Marketing and Design](#) (who were already longtime supporters of the theater and its mission, and were eager to help), we came up with a new logo for the theater and a look-and-feel for the brochure that has been reused with only minor changes ever since. (**My opinion:** resist the temptation to completely change the look and feel of the brochure each season. A consistent layout and branding, varying subtle things like fonts and colors from season to season, provides a sense of stability and familiarity. If it ain't broke, don't fix it.)

As an example, below are the exterior and interior views of the 2012 subscription campaign 8.5”x11” tri-fold. (These are copyright 2012 by, and used here with permission of, the Board of Directors of the Alameda Little Theatre Inc. d/b/a Altarena Playhouse.) It took many iterations working with our designer to come up with this, but I think it does a good job of capturing a lot of Newman's advice.

To wit, looking first at the exterior:

SUBSCRIBER BENEFITS:

5 new shows... same great price as 2011

Celebrate the 2012 season by becoming an Altarena subscriber and enjoy these exclusive benefits:

Free Cancellations and Exchanges

Just notify the box office 24 hours prior to your reservation, and we'll reschedule you to the date of your choice.

Season Savings

Save 20% off the regular ticket price. That's five shows for the price of four!

Guest Discounts

Bring guests and save 10% off the price of their tickets.

Discounts on a Night Out

Enjoy subscriber-only dinner discounts at some of Alameda's best restaurants.

Holiday and Special Event Discounts

Get discounts and early reservations priority for special events like holiday productions and guest artists.

Preferred Seating

Enter the theater before non-subscribers for the best choice of seats.

Flexible Reservations

Make your reservations months in advance or hours in advance, online or by phone.

Guaranteed Seating

Make reservations before the crowds, ensuring that you'll always have a seat.

Subscriptions to the Altarena's 2012 season will be offered for a limited time only. Don't wait. Show your support for year-round live theater in Alameda by becoming an Altarena Playhouse subscriber today!

Design/Printing - Cairdea Design & Marketing - www.cairdea.com



1409 High Street
Alameda, CA 94501
510-523-1553
www.altarena.org

ACT TODAY
TO RESERVE
YOUR 2012
SEASON
TICKETS!



- The front cover is simple and welcoming: prominent placement of the brand logo and the logos for the shows in the upcoming season, and the first of several placements of the call to action *Subscribe and Save*.
- The back panel lists, in what we have found to be order of importance based on patron surveys and fundraisers, the benefits of subscribing. This is the second call to action.
- The middle panel includes the theater's nonprofit mailing permit, giving us the flexibility to stick address labels on and do a direct bulk-mailing or to put it in an envelope (since the trifold is a standard letter-size paper, it fits in a regular business envelope, and we had envelopes printed up with the theater logo embossed on them).

Turning to the interior, where most of the content is:

2012 SEASON

JANUARY 20 - FEBRUARY 19

Fences

A play by August Wilson

Fifty-something Troy hasn't had it easy. The color barrier kept him out of Major League baseball, and as he struggles to make ends meet for his family, frustration over his tumultuous life sometimes gets in the way of his real affection for them. And the unfinished fence in his backyard...what's he trying to keep out—or fence in? This exploration of race relations in 1950s America, whose productions have featured James Earl Jones and Denzel Washington, won the Pulitzer Prize, the Tony, and the Drama Desk award.
Recommended for 13 & up.



MARCH 16 - APRIL 22

The Mousetrap

A mystery by Agatha Christie

It's 1952 and there's just been a murder at London's Paddington Station. Clues suggest the killer will strike next at Monkswell Manor... but for what vengeance, and against whom? Little do the guests realize that their hosts will soon be under suspicion—and threat of death! The longest-running play in history, presented continuously in London since 1952, *The Mousetrap* is seen by thousands of theatergoers annually... who are always asked at the end not to reveal "whodunit"! *Recommended for 13 & up.*



JUNE 8 - JULY 15

Spring Awakening

Music by Duncan Shaik
Book & Lyrics by Steven Sater

This Tony-award-winning, indie-rock retelling of Frank Wedekind's controversial 1892 play follows a



group of teens coming to terms with the new sensations and emotional turmoil that accompany adolescence. Energetic, unvarnished, bold, frank, and direct in its portrayal, *Spring Awakening* also won the Drama Desk and Olivier Awards. *Sexually-related themes and some explicit lyrics.*

AUGUST 3 - SEPTEMBER 2

Private Lives

A comedy by Noël Coward

When divorced couple Elyot and Amanda find themselves next-door neighbors during their honeymoons with their new (and younger) spouses, they realize they still have feelings for each other. The trouble is they can't live without each other—but they can't live with each other! This outrageous and slightly risqué comedy of manners has featured generations of actresses including Gertrude Lawrence, Tallulah Bankhead, Liz Taylor and Kim Cattrall. Winner of the Tony, Drama Desk, and Olivier awards.
Some adult situations and humor.



SEPTEMBER 28 - NOVEMBER 4

The Fantasticks

Music by Harvey Schmidt
Book & Lyrics by Tom Jones

The longest-running musical in history comes to Altarena with its subtle and timeless tale of youth, learning, love, and growth. With its poetic dialogue and a staging that epitomizes simplicity, *The Fantasticks* has enraptured audiences for over 50 years, from the iconic opening song to the end of the show. Join us and "try to remember... the fire of September that made us mellow."
Appropriate for all audiences.



SUBSCRIBE TODAY

5 new shows... same great price as 2011

Join us in creating high-quality live theater that is affordable for everyone! Your tax-deductible donations help us keep Altarena subscriptions the best entertainment deal in town.

THREE EASY WAYS TO SUBSCRIBE:

- Online: www.altarena.org
- By Phone: (510) 523-1553
- By Mail: Complete the form below

SUBSCRIPTION TYPE	PRICE	QTY	TOTAL
Adult	\$88		\$
Senior/Student	\$76		\$
Donation	Help support Altarena with your tax-deductible gift.		\$
Seniors: 62 and older Students: 18 and under with student I.D.			TOTAL \$

Mailing information - please print clearly

NAME _____

ADDRESS _____

CITY, STATE, ZIP _____

DAY PHONE _____ EVENING PHONE _____

EMAIL _____

CREDIT CARD # _____ ☐ VISA ☐ MASTERCARD

EXPIRATION DATE _____ 3 DIGIT V-CODE _____

☐ Add me to Altarena's email list

Please mail this form & your payment to:
(make checks payable to Altarena Playhouse)

Subscriptions
1409 High Street
Alameda, CA 94501



- The content is brief and direct, and speaks to *what the patron wants to know* rather than what we want to say about each production: run dates, why it's exciting (awards it won, etc.), genre (comedy vs. drama, play vs. musical), the audiences for which each production is appropriate (this information is important to our demographic; it may or may not be to yours), and description that's *short enough to get everything into 2 panels*—we want them to *subscribe*, not read a novel. It's not hard to write the copy by consulting Wikipedia, finding critics' reviews from major productions of the shows, and so on. I wrote the above copy without significant PR or communications background. At this point in the sales cycle we don't always know who the creative team will be for all shows, so for consistency we usually don't put that information in this preseason mailing at all.
- The third call to action is the tear-off response panel (the other side of which is the list of subscriber benefits). There are only two subscription choices, to keep it simple. Once we start the season there will be upgrade possibilities, flex subscriptions, and a separate outreach campaign with a different mailing for deeply-discount student subscriptions, but at this point, the call must be crystal clear and the required action obvious: *Subscribe Now*.
- *Three easy ways to subscribe* highlights the patron's convenience. (But in this case, we goofed by not providing a *direct* link to the subscription sales page.)
- There's a convenient way to add a donation along with the order—a secondary call to action that tries not to overpower the main message of *Subscribe Now*. This is the one place we arguably deviate from Newman's "single message" guidelines.

- There's an opt-in for our email list. For new subscribers who choose to subscribe by mail rather than online, this saves us (and them) a step.

It's worth pointing out that we began with an eight-panel (4 front, 4 back) design that could fit on legal size paper. Even though the printing and mailing costs would have been about the same, we found that it was too cluttered and busy, and we were able to remove many elements while keeping the essentials above. To paraphrase Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, the perfect brochure has been achieved *not* when nothing further can be added, but when nothing further can be taken out.

We ordered a ton of them—more than we needed, because there was a *big* price break at around 1,000 pieces, when they switch from laser to offset printing, making it only slightly more expensive to order 1,000 than to order 500. As a result we were able to stock them generously, distribute them to local businesses and other theaters, take handfuls of them to social events, send them to senior centers and student groups, and more.

In-Theater Subscription Promotion

During *at least* the final production of the current season and the first production of the upcoming season, a *main* goal of the curtain speech is to plug subscriptions. The house manager first roundly thanks the current subscribers ("Raise your hand if you are already a subscriber. Hey, let's give them a big hand!"), then reminds the nonsubscriber patrons that next time *they* could be the ones getting the warm shout-out, first pick of seats, dinner discounts at nearby restaurants, free wine at intermission, etc. In other words, she makes them *want* to be one of the cool kids, and the subtext of the message is "This place is great! Isn't this place great? The good news is that we want *you, too*, to be part of our inner circle and have ringside seats for the greatness!" (By the way, this should make it clear that the curtain speech *is a performance*, even if only a 2-minute one. Choose carefully who gives it. I have witnessed some of the lamest curtain speeches in small-theater history. And there's nothing like a pre-recorded curtain speech to completely strip away any sense that there might be *actual human beings making art* here, with whom the audience can identify and empathize.)

Then, all throughout the first production of the new season, we offer single-ticket buyers the chance to "upgrade" to a subscription by simply paying the difference. We have forms ready in the lobby at intermission where they can fill in their credit card number or leave cash (*who carries checks in this day and age?*); a box office agent processes them during Act II and by the end of the evening we can hand them their subscriber fulfillment package. Basically, the subscription drive isn't really over until after the first production has closed.

Other Subscriber Perks

We went door-to-door aggressively signing up local restaurants to offer subscribers a dinner discount on show nights. Most restaurants were very receptive to the idea of mutual support between local businesses, and one of them even started featuring an "Altarena Special" on their printed menu—"a delicious combination served quickly to get you to the theater on time." Brilliant.

A longtime patron had recently entered the winemaking business, and we worked out a mutually beneficial relationship in which they became the exclusive wine suppliers to the theater (for at least a couple of seasons), getting quite prominent visibility at the concessions stand in exchange for offering us their wholesale price. They even offered to give Altarena subscribers a discount on purchases from the winery itself—now *there* was a subscription perk I could get behind!

In addition to subscription campaign planning along the lines Newman suggests, we had many other discussions leading to policies that would make life especially pleasant for our subscribers. Although Altarena had general seating at that time (they have since moved to assigned seating, which results in a much better experience for everyone but requires careful planning to implement), subscribers would get to enter the house first, so they get first choice of seats. They can change or cancel up to 2 hours before curtain at no cost, and that includes additional revenue tickets that they've bought for friends or purchased for shows not included in the subscription. When they do buy tickets for friends, they get a 10-15% discount on those. They get a warm shout-out during every curtain speech.

The bottom line is that the battle for subscriptions is never over—we were *always* on the lookout for new perks we could offer. If we got a limited-engagement performer to do a cabaret or one-person show, subscribers would get dibs. If we had a sellout show, we'd hold back some seats from online sale to release to subscribers who'd forgotten to make reservations, or we'd let subscribers make their reservations before opening up general sales. If we added a production or workshop not in the regular season, subscribers got a discount. Even with these efforts, the dollar yield of subscribers remains much higher, and they gave Altarena a solid base from which to solicit donations and, later, show sponsorships and capital campaigns.

Bottom line: I'm still with Danny Newman. *Subscribe Now!*

Being a Subscriber Should Be Painless and Gratifying

If you think Subscribers are important, they deserve a good experience. Even commercial airlines—an industry sector rarely praised for great customer service—have a separate “concierge” phone number for their platinum frequent flyers. Recently I visited a theater's website with the intention of buying tickets to a particular show, but I ended up deciding to subscribe instead because their season looked interesting and the perks were nice. I had bought single tickets from them before, and the process had been easy: pick your date, pick your seats, enter credit card. So I followed the links for “Season Pass,” entered my information, and purchased. I assumed the next step would be that I could immediately use my Season Pass to reserve seats for the specific show I'd come to get tickets for in the first place.

Nope. Instead I received a confirmation email thanking me for becoming a subscriber, and explaining the process for making my subscriber reservations:

1. Sometime later in the day (it ended up being many hours later), I'd receive a *separate* email with my “unique subscriber code,” which turned out to be a series of 9 letters and numbers that was impossible to remember without writing down somewhere.
2. To make a reservation using my season pass, I should go to their website and click “Single Ticket Purchase” (I should *not* click the prominent “Season Pass” link).
3. Then I should follow the process as if I was buying regular tickets for a specific date.
4. At the very last step before credit card payment, I should look for a link saying “Enter discount code” and click it.
5. Then I would need to enter my 9-letters-and-digits unique subscriber code, which would give me a “discount” of 100% and make the tickets free.
6. Finally, I should complete the checkout.

What if I forget my unique subscriber code—do I have an account or login or some way to recover the code? No. How do I change or cancel a subscriber reservation? Doesn't say—I guess I'd call the box office.

Similarly, another theater I really love just switched to a new ticketing system. Now when I subscribe, I have to pick my dates in advance. How should I know *which* Thursday night I'll be free eight months from now? Why do I have to purchase the "Thursday night series" even though the theater performs 5 nights a week and there is no price difference on other nights except Friday/Saturday? But at least this one has instructions on how to change your reservation. A confirmation email (which you had better not lose) contains a *different* "discount code" for *each production of the season*. To exchange your ticket, you sign in to their system, pretend you're buying a whole new ticket, enter the discount code...or wait, maybe first you cancel your existing reservation...I forgot how to do it, and the ticketing site provided no instructions. And I had misplaced the confirmation email, so despite the fact that I had a login and password so the site would know who I was, logging in did not reveal the codes. So there was no way to recover the lost codes without (again) calling the box office. So much for the convenience of subscribing.

This is stupid. The process for (supposedly important) subscribers to exercise their subscriber benefits at these theaters is *less convenient* than the process for buying single tickets! Given that both these theaters routinely over-discount (see the next section), I feel like a well-meaning sucker for having subscribed at all, and the pain of trying to exercise my benefits just rubs it in.

To their credit, though, one of the two theaters in my true story did get one thing right: the cost per show for a subscription reflected about a 35% discount off of single ticket prices, and when you add in free exchanges (normally there's an exchange fee around \$5-10) and the free glass of wine etc., you are getting close to 40-45% off. This figure is important because when theaters do promotions using sites like Goldstar¹ (see next section) or discounts such as buy-one-get-one-free to promote a show, Subscribers are still getting about as good a deal as anyone else. On the other hand, if Subscribers consistently see that the price they paid is being undercut by constant last-minute "desperation discounts," it may erode their good will (which is likely correlated to their propensity to donate) and lead them to decide that in the future they should just wait for the theater to get desperate and offer half-price single tickets. Subscribers are normally *more* likely to donate precisely because they *do* feel more of an investment in and relationship with the organization; don't squander that by mistreating them.

Using and Misusing Discounts

A good use of discounting is to *acquire new customers*. That can be a valuable tool to build your subscriber base. On the other hand, a *misuse* of discounting is to *fill seats*. Doing so telegraphs desperation, cannibalizes audience-building efforts, and mostly doesn't work anyway.

For example, [GroupOn](#) used to have wide visibility for offering group-oriented discounts. In case you haven't used it, each day they offered a deep discount on some product or service, like "Get a \$30 dinner gift certificate for only \$10"; typically the quantities and buying period are limited, so people stampede to redeem the offer. The merchant gets the proceeds minus a cut taken by GroupOn. GroupOn's reach was so wide that its aggregating power virtually guaranteed you'd sell a lot of whatever you're offering.

Yet when Altarena was approached by GroupOn asking if we wanted to offer discounted show tickets through their program, we said no.

We're not averse to discounting; we already offered half-price and complimentary tickets through Goldstar. But while there are caveats about offering too many comps or discounted tickets (which we discuss next), at

¹ Now defunct, Goldstar.com used to offer live-entertainment tickets at a price that was always at least half-off the retail price (not counting add-on fees). This was a valuable channel that many theaters misused.

least we get customers who are interested in live entertainment, and *might* therefore become repeat customers. In contrast (and meaning no disrespect to GroupOn), I suspect most of the customers we'd reach there would just as happily take half-price hot dogs, because GroupOn's very brand is the idea of *getting the discount*, not the specific product category offered. In contrast, Goldstar had positioned themselves as offering deals for people who want to "go out more."

It's already a challenge for small theaters to identify their niche audiences, even from among a group of known theatergoers. GroupOn may put some butts in seats, but we didn't think it would keep them there.

How Not To Discount

In contrast, discount ticket resellers such as Goldstar and TodayTix (which has since acquired them) provide a useful service, but I think many theaters misuse the service to their disadvantage.

To the customer, these are places they can get a ticket at a discount ranging from 35% off to free (plus a service fee). But to the theater company, it *should* be a place where they can get their theater and production info in front of people who might *not* otherwise have seen it.

If your goal is to offer a promotional price to a particular group (students, working actors, whatever), just offer them directly yourself by setting up special-priced tickets with "Promo codes" that you publish to those groups. If you're putting inventory on an external reseller, it should be to get *new* audiences or get reviews and publicity. (Goldstar encouraged users to write reviews, which is great for publicity, but doesn't give you the purchasers' email address; TodayTix has no reviews, but does give you that information.)

There's an easy way to check if an external vendor is working for you or against you. When their will-call lists are delivered, check to see how many patrons on those lists are new to your theater. If most of them are already in your patron database, you're selling half price tickets to people who should be targeted as subscribers.

You may be surprised that the above advice about abusing discounts comes from the *co-founder of Goldstar*²! The people you're trying to attract with discount tickets are those who don't yet know you, which is where Goldstar can help. The people who already know you are not that sensitive to discounts—when was the last time you heard one of those loyal patrons praise your show but complain about the price they paid to attend?—but if those loyal patrons are buying on Goldstar, they can cannibalize your box office sales if you're not careful. That's a double whammy—you're getting only half-price from patrons who know you and could enjoy a comparable discount by subscribing, and on top of that they are depleting the half-price inventory that could be used to lure brand-new patrons. And besides alienating subscribers who paid a higher price in good faith months ago, if most of your seats are filled with half-price-paying patrons, you have basically established the half-price point as your retail price point. And price signals value: a theater that is constantly flooding the market with half-price tickets is sending the message that its shows aren't worth paying more than half-price to see.

Finally, Goldstar's and TodayTix's business goals aren't fully aligned with yours. They make money when *any* patron buys *any* tickets to *any* theater. The disappearance of your small theater won't be visible on their bottom line. Arms dealers make money no matter who wins the war. This doesn't mean they're evil and you

² Jim McCarthy, a founder of Goldstar, used to have a blog that is no longer accessible. One of his earliest posts (<http://www.download-not-available.com/quick-takes/how-not-to-discount-a-recap>) is the basis of this discussion.

shouldn't use them—quite the contrary—but remember that they generally don't care about the things you care about.

Despite all the above caveats, I'm amazed how often the director or actors will come out on stage after a performance and say "If you liked the show, tell your friends to get tickets on Goldstar." That makes no sense to me; if the show sells well, Goldstar ought to have very few tickets for sale, except a few to get your name in front of potential new patrons. Victory is achieved when you're selling enough seats that you rarely need to offer any significant discount inventory.

All of the above should also make clear that being a responsible Box Office Manager requires constant attention to managing inventory, making decisions about discounting, and so on. If you thought you could just open up the online storefront and wait for shows to sell out, think again: this is active marketing.

Sales Is Not Customer Acquisition

In an ideal world, any given patron would buy a third-party discounted ticket to your theater at most once. People in the "permanent discount" category (actors, students, etc.) shouldn't have to go through a third-party sales channel to get the discount—you want them in the tent by offering them a subscription discount directly. And when you do get a new customer through an external sales channel, bring them into the tent as quickly as you can.

When considering a discount as a way to build new audiences, ask yourself: Who will respond to this discount? Why would those people *not* have come in through existing channels? How likely is it that they might become repeat customers? *And when they walk in the door, how will we identify them as first-timers, and go out of our way to cultivate that relationship?* The moment a patron checks in at will-call, you need to be able to identify which category they are in, and act accordingly:

- "I see it's your first time here! If you're willing to sign up for our email list, we'd be happy to offer you a complimentary glass of wine before the show [or at intermission]. We promise to never sell or share your email address and we will only use it to send you one or two emails a month about our work and about ticket discounts available only by email."
 - Alternative used by other theaters: a slip of paper in the program asking the patron to rate the show, and asking them to join an email list to win free tickets for future shows. This is nice, but somehow the promise of *free wine right now* seems more compelling to me. (Though of course maybe that's just me.) And you can do both: free wine right now for signing up on our email list, *and* a survey in the program to win free tickets to future shows.
- "I see you found us on Goldstar [or another discount channel]! I just wanted to let you know that if you enjoy tonight, you can subscribe and pay about the same amount per show as you paid for your discounted ticket, but with free cancellations and exchanges, a free glass of wine at intermission, and discounts if you bring your friends. If you're interested, I'd be happy to apply the price of tonight's ticket towards a subscription. Please allow me to give you our season brochure. Any staff member would be happy to help you if you decide to subscribe!"
 - [If they don't bite:] "Of course, I understand. Either way, we would really appreciate it if you'd write an honest review on social media after tonight's show!"
- "I see it's your third time seeing a show here. Thank you so much for coming back! Did you know that if you subscribe you'd be saving money and also getting free cancellations and exchanges and even a free glass of wine at intermission with every show? [I know, I'm obsessed with the free wine thing.

Sue me.] Please allow me to give you our season brochure. Any staff member would be happy to help you if you decide to subscribe!”

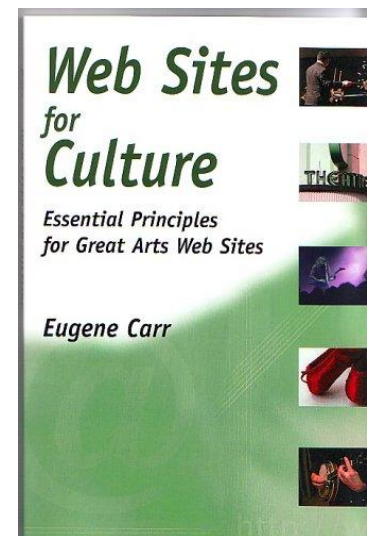
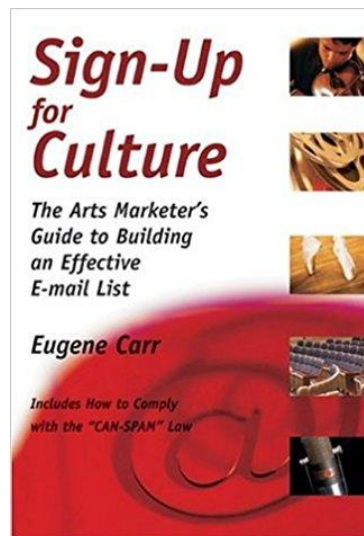
Whatever you say about the benefits of subscribing in this spiel, *say it again* during the curtain speech. If you know you have lots of subscribers in the audience, ask them to raise their hands at the curtain speech and give them a shout out. (If you don’t have many subscribers in the house...just skip this step! Your ticketing system should be able to provide this information when the house opens.)

Make sure your (beautiful) subscription brochures are ubiquitously available: have a tabletop brochure rack at the snack bar, put up framed copies in the bathroom (seriously; don’t underestimate how many people will see them), make sure the ushers have them, and if it’s towards the beginning of the season, slip it into every program. (No, don’t make it part of the program content. People tend not to take programs home, but they might take home a slim brochure that describes future offerings and, maybe, makes it easy for them to sign up. And if you spent the proper time and effort creating a beautiful brochure, nothing in the program will look as good.)

Email Marketing and Promotion

In 2004, the mentality around email marketing was that of an “email blast” sent indiscriminately to the few thousand people on the email list. Besides the fact that such behavior is generally illegal now due to CAN-SPAM laws, it’s a poor way to think about email marketing.

In 2004, when e-marketer Eugene Carr wrote [Web Sites for Culture](#) (about designing effective arts websites) and [Sign Up for Culture](#) (about building email marketing lists), the Internet was already an important channel for arts marketing. Mr. Carr runs a company (or used to) called PatronMail, which handles email marketing for arts organizations. The findings in his book are based primarily on that company’s surveys administered to the participating arts organizations and in some cases to those organizations’ patrons.



At the time of his writing, audiences 55 and under preferred to receive arts information via email rather than direct mail (and those audiences are now approaching 75), which saves you a lot of money and allows you to do quick targeting. But building a list doesn’t happen by accident, and once built, you have to curate and grow it by thinking carefully about the timing and content of each message you send, rather than thinking about “email blasts”. To that end, I’ll try to summarize Mr. Carr’s main advice regarding email marketing. Although he doesn’t state it quite this way, my take-away from his books is that most theaters make two fundamental mistakes in email marketing:

1. Incorrectly believing that building up a good email list is something that happens by itself, when in fact it is a *campaign* like selling subscriptions, which requires corresponding attention to design and execution.

2. Misusing their email list once they have it.

Building an Email List as a Campaign

Opt-in is a must. You *must* use a system that allows customers to gracefully opt in or out. Besides the legal requirements of complying with CAN-SPAM laws, people who *do* opt-in tend to read your email: Carr's surveys find that only 5% of opt-in patrons report that they delete those emails without reading them. And while it's technically legal, don't opt someone in as soon as they buy a ticket on your website: show goodwill by giving them the opportunity to opt in or not. *Most modern email marketing platforms (EMPs) such as MailChimp require opt-in by default, and do a great job of complying with all applicable laws. Don't try to roll it yourself.*

Get signups on your website. Exercise: Watch a friend visit your theater's website and try to sign up for your email list. How easy is it? How many clicks are required? How do the placement, visibility, and ease of use of the signup link compare to those of successful arts organizations in your peer group? 70-90% of visits to arts websites are about event selection or ticket buying; the patron didn't come there to sign up. Therefore, an ideal mechanism is a clearly labeled, highly visible signup link that triggers a pop-up, so the patron can quickly sign up without interrupting what they came to your site to do. If they have to click over to another page just to get to the signup link, you've lost 50%+ of your signups.

Find out how your EMP stacks up. I have no horse in this race, but have had very good results with Mailchimp, which is also [recommended](#) by the nonprofit advice site WiredImpact. Mailchimp even offers discounts for nonprofits and further discounts for using their secure 2-factor authentication, which adds up to a [23% discount overall](#). And since it needs to be *super easy* for a patron to find the "sign up for our email list" link on your theater's home page, an EMP like Mailchimp that has no-brainer integration with popular Website frameworks (WordPress, Drupal, Wix, etc.) is a plus.

Don't rent, sell, or buy lists. Historically, the yield from purchased/traded lists is low, and the cost in patron goodwill is high. (Some people like me don't even join a list unless there's an explicit promise that my info won't be shared with others, and I actually create multiple email aliases so that I can always figure out who sold my email address to someone else.) Any signup vehicles should carry prominent language that you won't sell or trade your patrons' info, and that every email they receive from you will contain an "unsubscribe immediately" link (which is required by CAN-SPAM anyway).

Get signups everywhere, if necessary by offering small incentives. You can make up inexpensive cards that people can fill out and leave at the boxoffice to sign up for your list; give them out in the lobby before the show, in the parking lot, at the coat check, everywhere. You can tuck cards or an insert into the show program, but make sure it's slightly larger and highly visible (e.g. using colored cardstock) so it clearly sticks out of the program and calls attention to itself. You can offer simple incentives to sign up, both online and with the cards: Get \$1 off today's ticket purchase if you sign up for our list (easy to implement—set up a table where a staff member is collecting cards and handing out dollar bills, and you'll be surprised how many patrons who do sign up will donate that dollar right back to the theater); or get a free cookie or soft drink at the concession stand; and so on. You might even raise your ticket price by \$1 to neutralize this cost if you have great response. Have lobby posters with "sign up for our email list" QR codes.

Make every "transactional" email include a signup link. Transactional emails are those sent to individual patrons to confirm a ticket purchase, pass along performance information, and the like, as opposed to "marketing" emails where the same message is sent to many people. Create a standard "footer" or signature block for you and your staff's transactional emails that includes an exhortation to sign up, and a link.

Ask a few questions. Studies suggest that patrons are willing to answer 2 to 3 non-intrusive questions at signup time, and historically, it's quite hard to collect such info after the fact even if you have their email address. An ideal thing to ask is what aspects of your theater's work are of interest to them (regular season shows? children's programs? acting workshops? readings of new works? etc.) and use your EMP's ability to segment the list accordingly.

Using Your Email List Effectively

Don't flood. 55% of arts patrons are happy to receive 1 email per month from a given organization, and 25% are OK receiving two or three per month. One organization I really support has the annoying habit of sending many emails per month, most of them announcing additional forms of promotions or discounts for the current production. This makes it seem as if they are desperate to sell tickets, trying any promotion that will stick. (And even if that's the case, the least they could do is exclude subscribers like me from those emails, so I don't feel like a sucker having paid the subscriber price for the show.) Time your email dates strategically and well in advance to coordinate with your show sales cycles. A typical cycle might include a "get your tickets now" email for a production before it opens, a "critics say" email (if the reviews are good) partway into the run, and a "last chance" email before the closing weekends.

Have a consistent look, feel, and sender. Use the same well-branded email template for all emails to your list, and always have the same "person" sign it ("Barbara Jones, Artistic Director," or the box office manager, patron outreach coordinator, whoever—but the one public face of your email campaigns). Spend some time getting the template right and matching your organization's and website's brand, since you can then re-use it forever. Most EMPs have rich editors that allow you to develop templates using your own logo assets.

One call-to-action per email. A single email should highlight exactly one call to action (renew subscription, buy tickets for a specific production, give a subscription as a holiday gift, etc.) This also helps keep email short, making it more likely it'll be read. The call to action should include a link to a page that minimizes the number of clicks for the patron to follow through. For example, Audience1st allows creating links that take the patron to a Buy Tickets page pre-populated for a particular production or even a particular performance.

Target promotion/discount email announcements carefully. Use selective mailing list targeting to send certain discounts *only* to people who might need more enticement, such as a patron who has only been to one of your shows and purchased through Goldstar. What if you offered them a half-price ticket *directly on your site*, without sending them to Goldstar? And once they are back in the theater, thank them for coming and see if you can talk them into subscribing. The point is that regular patrons who come steadily anyway *don't need* a discount incentive, so there's no reason to send them those emails. Each email campaign should be based on generating a report that asks: *Who might enjoy this production but isn't likely to buy tickets without an incentive, and what should that incentive be?*

Be selective. The only thing more annoying than getting repeated emails with N different promotions for a show, is getting those emails when I *already have* tickets to that show. First, if I've already seen the show, the emails just get in my way. Second, if I paid full price in advance to see the show, seeing email after email describing a discount promotion makes me feel like a sucker. Each email you send is "training" the patron to act a certain way; think about what you yourself would do if you received them under various sets of circumstances.

Track your success. Most EMPs let you track open rates, and any links in an email should contain a UTM code so you can track clickbacks. I've heard it remarked that because email is so inexpensive to send, it doesn't

matter whether it works well or not. But if someone approached you with a “free” publicity opportunity that might alienate patrons if mishandled, would you accept?

All of the above will be a lot less painful if your EMP (MailChimp, ConstantContact, etc.) integrates with your patron database, so that you can easily target specific patrons for email campaigns and export those lists to your EMP. It also ensures that when patrons change their contact info or email address in your database, those changes are automatically propagated to your EMP, and vice versa.

Fundraising

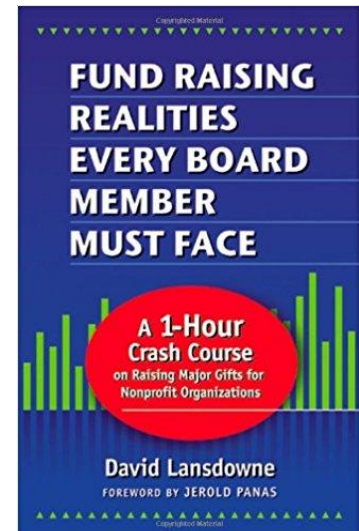
It’s no secret that community (and many professional) theaters rely on “unearned revenue” (i.e. donations of some kind) for 50% or more of their revenue. And it turns out that people are much more likely to give money if you actually ask them. But not all Board members of such theaters have much experience asking. This concise book is for them: here’s a few highlights from [*Fund Raising Realities Every Board Member Must Face*](#) by experienced fundraiser David Lansdowne.

Preliminaries

Write down your organization’s mission as specifically as possible. People don’t give because you have need; other causes more urgent than yours have needs too. Nor do donors give just because they have money: most wealthy people became wealthy by being as careful about where they spend as anyone else. Donors give because they *believe* in your mission and want you to be successful, and they feel gratified if they can contribute to that success. So you must be able to articulate your mission clearly, and convey fanatical devotion to pursuing it. Fundraising consultants and grantwriters can give help and advice, but in the end, your own leadership is best positioned to impassion your own supporters and make the ask, using the voice of people really invested in your organization.

Lead by example. If Board members entrusted with the fiduciary health of the theater don’t give, how can they ask others to do so? Yes, you volunteer your time, but your time doesn’t buy lighting upgrades, pay actor stipends, or cover performance royalties. Volunteers donate time; benefactors donate money; Board members are expected to do both, to the reasonable limit of their means.

Announce a quantitative target and deadline, and articulate the specific benefits of the giving campaign. “Just raise as much as you can” is a non-strategy that sends donors the message that you don’t know what you’re doing (which doesn’t help at grant-writing time), and robs the organization (and donors) of the motivation of contributing towards a goal before a certain deadline. How will the money be used? Ideally, it will boost some aspect of the theater to a new place—better overall financial stability leading to higher production values, renovating the facilities leading to greater comfort for guests, providing scholarships for young patrons, or whatever—otherwise the donors will think “They’re just going to go through this money and come back asking for more next year.” (Of course, you probably *are* going to ask them for more later, but the point is that donations should be fortifying the organization in some specific way, rather than just supplementing the earned revenue of ticket sales.)



Think in thirds. In campaign after campaign, 1/3 of the total comes from the top few donors, 1/3 from the next tranche of donors about 10x the size of the first tranche, and 1/3 from everyone else. So if your donor pool is (say) 500 people and you're trying to raise \$15,000, you might expect to get about \$5,000 from your top five donors at \$1000 each, \$5000 more from your next fifty best donors at \$100 each, and \$5000 from small donations from the remaining 445 people. If you can't identify the top few donors who could cover 1/3 of your total ask, the campaign may be too ambitious at your current level.

Target high-profile, influential individuals who believe in your mission. 85% of all US charitable contributions each year come from individuals, not grants or foundations. Also, while big corporations and trusts are accustomed to being asked, they are not invested in your mission the way that your best patrons and benefactors are. Within the individual-donor pool, your top 10% of donors will contribute about 90% of your funds. Those 10% are so important that approaching each individual should be considered its own mini-campaign. The best among the 10% are those who are high-profile pillars of the community who will set a visible example that others will want to emulate.

Don't start from zero. Don't publicize a fundraising campaign until *after* you've secured some foundational donations to start it off. And you may not need to "publicize" it at all, or spend money on fancy collaterals, since your best prospects are already within your community: they listen to your curtain speeches, receive your emails and mailings, and so on.

Don't confuse programming with fundraising. Beware of putting on "fundraiser shows": the expenses can creep up on you to the point where the yield is not really a "fundraiser" at all, even if the performers perform for free. (You have to staff the house, sell tickets, and incur the other fixed expenses of raising the curtain.) And if you do put on a fundraiser, don't be charitable and try to price tickets so that it's affordable to everyone. (If that's your goal, consider instead having a "member appreciation event" or similar that is lower-key and not designed to raise revenue.) The whole point is to attract those who can pay *and will want to give*.

What does the donor want?

Mark Jacobson wrote a 2005 article in *Fund Raising Success Magazine* about understanding *why* donors give, and using that understanding to your advantage in targeting them. He proposes the following checklist when approaching a donor:

1. Have you asked each donor recently why they support your organization? If not, maybe it's time to invite them one or two at a time to a fundraiser.
2. Can you align the donor's interests ("donor need") with your mission focus ("institutional need")? If not, are the elements of your mission clear? If so, are you using that information to tailor the "ask" to each donor, or are the next points of contact decided by a fixed "marketing-appeal plan?"
3. Which donors prefer being contacted by direct mail? E-mail? Phone call? In person over a drink?
4. Are you asking people to give and upgrade in a manner consistent with their other response patterns? Are you basing renewal strategies on techniques that successfully netted their last gift?

We can extract some action points from Mark's suggestions:

Communicate face-to-face with your prospects. A fundraiser performance doesn't allow you to get face time with your prospects. How about a cocktail party at a Board member's house, or a similar setting that maximizes opportunities for networking? Some entertainment (maybe a scene or song previewing the coming seasons' productions) is fine, but it's not a performance, it's a fundraising event. Don't let the tail wag the dog.

When the time is right, ask directly, *give them a number*, and treat it as the start of the conversation. Putting the opportunity to give in front of someone isn't enough. *You have to ask them*. This can be a combination of a personal letter, personal email, phone call, face to face chat, or whatever. And when you do ask, don't ask your best prospects to "give what they can." *Give them a target*. If they balk, work your way gently through the following 4 points to see where the obstacle is:³

1. Insufficiently emotionally invested in your mission. Continue to cultivate donor and ask again later.
2. They like your theater but aren't interested in supporting this specific project. Find another project they can support.
3. They can't afford the amount you asked for. Negotiate your way down to what they can afford.
4. Timing is not good for them. Get them committed to being involved, and reassure them the timing can be worked out—perhaps giving in installments, or waiting until a slightly later date but having some formal commitment of their support (even an email).

Give them recognition. Donors want to feel they have helped a worthy organization get better, ideally permanently. Send *personally signed* thank-you letters (not emails) immediately for any substantial donation. Make sure the names of all donors above a certain threshold (say \$50) are listed in the program and that that list is up-to-date with each program that goes to press. One idea that has worked quite well at Altarena is "Show Sponsorship," which allows one or more donors to partially neutralize the production costs of a show. Their names appear in the show's program and they are verbally thanked in every curtain speech during the production, along with the theater's "big" sponsors like the local businesses, including those that contribute products for the concessions stand. (To his credit, former Altarena Board President Joe Mallon introduced this practice because it had worked well at Shotgun Players, where he had been involved before joining Altarena's Board.) You can also offer your donors free tickets and other treat-them-nice perks. *Fundraising research has shown that 50% of donors will give again, but 80% will do so if they feel their previous contribution was properly acknowledged.*

Cultivate donors long-term. Even small donations (say, \$25-50 contributed through your website) should mark someone as a possible future prospect. A good donation system will let you report on previous donations so you can up the ask: "Last year you were generous enough to donate \$50. We are hoping we could count on you for a \$75 gift this year." For larger gifts, you will certainly need more than one conversation.

Evaluate the campaign so you can do better next year, according to the above guidelines.

Yes, people get uncomfortable about asking for money. But you're not asking for money for yourself: you're asking others to join you in supporting a good cause about which they are as passionate as you and from which you get no financial benefit (indeed, if you're setting a good example, you yourself are already contributing time *and* money).

But if you don't make the mission crystal clear, and *ask directly* for support of that mission, you won't get far. After all, who wakes up in the morning thinking, "My goal for today is to write a bunch of checks to causes I like"?

An Interesting Lesson From *The Guardian*

³ Adapted from Jerold Panas, *Fundraising's Four Magic Questions: Answer These and the Gift Is Yours*, 2003, Emerson & Church Publishers.

The Guardian is a British daily newspaper in roughly the same league as *The Times of London*, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, etc. Like many traditional newspapers, the demise of classified ads had it on the ropes, until it tried a new strategy in which it made its content free, but appealed to readers to donate voluntarily—while still preserving a “subscribe” option (which eliminated ads and allowed offline reading on your phone, but didn’t unlock new content) for its “superfans.” The strategy worked: the newspaper *turned a profit* in 2019 for the first time in years, and revenue is growing. The full story of how that happened [is interesting](#), but particularly worth reading is a bit of advice on how an organization can raise funds from its patrons without relying *solely* on transactional revenue (money exchanged for goods). Here’s an excerpt from the linked article (emphases are mine, and edited for brevity):

- **Have an identity. Be seen as fighting for something**, even if in your case it might be your community’s interests instead of a political philosophy. ... the surfeit of free alternatives means a reader’s attachment to you has to go much deeper than it used to.
- Remember that people’s financial relationship with a publication **isn’t purely transactional**. “You write stories I want to read, I give you money” is one way to view the paid-reader relationship. But so are “**I like what you stand for, I give you money,**” “**I want others to be able to read your stories, I give you money,**” and “**I want to be the sort of person who supports you, I give you money.**” With a functionally infinite supply of free news available, the relationship your reader has to you has to be a lot more like the one public radio listeners have with their favorite station. They’re not buying access; they’re supporting a cause.
- A Pew study in March found that 71 percent of Americans believe that “their local news outlets are doing very or somewhat well financially.” ... Your readers **need to know** that they need to support you, and that’s a task that requires much more sophisticated communication than a paywall that suddenly shows up one morning.

Closing Words: Practical Technology Advice

Note: unless specifically mentioned, I don’t work for or have any formal connection to any of the companies whose products I mention or link to; I’m just reporting on what’s worked well and not-so-well in my own experience.

What’s the purpose of your Web site?

When most people visit a restaurant’s website, they are probably there to find out concrete things, such as: Are you open now? What is on the menu? How do I make a reservation? How do I get there? Yet frustratingly, many restaurant websites put everything *except* that information front and center, opening with annoying and lengthy animations, placing links like “Our Story” front and center, taking a long time to load enormous high-resolution photos of the chefs at work, and so on.

Many theater websites are almost as bad. They look like a tremendous amount of effort has gone into them while ignoring the patron’s main needs. *If* a customer actually navigates to your website—and that’s rare—you need to do 3 things:

1. Make it *as easy as possible* for them to see when the upcoming performances are and to buy tickets.
 - a. If they make it to the Buy Tickets page, make it *as easy as possible* for them to sign up for your email list, with a highly-visible promise that you will *never share their info with anyone*.
 - b. ...and if the timing is appropriate, point out that they could *subscribe now and save* instead of just buying the pair of tickets they came for.

2. Make it clear *how to get to the theater* (car, public transit, whatever). You'd be amazed how tricky it can be to find this info. This can be as easy as making the street address of the theater a clickable link that opens to that address in Google Maps.

"As easy as possible" means that the means to do each of these must be immediately visible as soon as they hit your site. No scrolling: it should be *right there* on the screen and impossible to ignore. You may have web pages with press photos, production history, and so on. That's lovely, but most visitors will never view them. A basic site that communicates your visual identity and makes selling easy is key.

Developing and publishing a Web site

There are three basic technical approaches to designing and deploying your theater's web site:

1. Have someone do a custom design using high-end tools. This used to be the norm but is now unnecessary, costly, and hard to maintain, so we won't discuss it further.
2. Have someone design a site (or do so yourself) using a proprietary paid platform like Wix, Square, or Weebly, which combines authoring tools and "pre-designed" components with site hosting.
3. Have someone design a site (or do so yourself) using open source software such as WordPress, and pay to have it hosted.

Option #2 is not a terrible option, and arguably the quickest to get the site up. But although services like Wix and Weebly are inexpensive and make it "easy" to build a site, I prefer option #3 for a couple of reasons.

First, with all due respect to sites such as Wix, doing a good design isn't "easy," any more than home remodeling is "easy" just because the tools are available conveniently at Home Depot. There's a reason good Web designers are paid for their work. If you're going to do it yourself using an off-the-shelf website theme (which is what these companies generally provide), in my opinion it's better to go with an open-source Content Management System (CMS) and spend your money to hire a designer who knows how to design the theme around your branding. (And if you don't yet have branding, this is an opportunity to establish consistent branding for your site, communications, brochure, etc.) By far the most popular such CMS is WordPress (for which I'll argue in a moment), which has thousands of free third-party plug-ins and extensions that do all of the things that the proprietary site builders do. With an open source CMS, use of the software itself is free, though you must still pay to have the site hosted (published) online, but hosting costs for low-traffic sites are as low as \$5 a month. ("Low traffic" means tens of thousands to hundreds of thousands of monthly visits. You're not Facebook.)

My second concern with services like Wix and Weebly is that their authoring tools are proprietary and they may not make it easy for you to migrate your site's design and data to another provider if the relationship sours. You may become beholden to them for the lifetime of your site.

Among the open-source offerings, I am a big fan of [WordPress](#) for many reasons. Because it has been around since 2003, it has a vibrant ecosystem of "plug-ins" to enhance the site and integrate with other relevant services, and a huge community of freelancers familiar with working with it. Its user interface is relatively easy to learn, meaning that once the design is done, regular theater staff without any Web authoring experience can make routine changes such as adding information and photos for new shows. Hundreds of companies offer WordPress hosting starting as low as \$5 per month; you can get recommendations from [the nonprofit WordPress stewardship organization itself](#).