

STAGE directions

From 1995 until 2007, Lisa Lipkin was a regular contributor to Stage Directions Magazine, writing about the technical and business side of performing arts. She also wrote dance reviews and profiles of individual artists.

It's all In the Branding

Written by Lisa Lipkin

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A fabled TV market research tool is venturing into legit theatre.

Say the name “Nielsen,” and television executives around the country quiver in their boots. Ever since Arthur Charles Nielsen, Sr., an American market analyst, first developed a method for measuring the audiences of radio and television broadcasting programs in the early 1960s, the Nielsen ratings have been the single most important element in determining advertising rates, schedules and even program content. That kind of cold, statistic-driven approach to “art” has always been shunned by live theatre professionals. Until now, that is. In an intriguing partnership between Nielsen Research Group (NRG), an affiliate of the television ratings group, and Broadway.com, the theatre news and ticketing Web site, a year-old company called Live Theatrical Events is determined to help producers reap more revenue by using the vast amount of data they collect to their advantage.

The alliance between the two companies is not only timely; it's strategic. While NRG has tremendous expertise in market research for movies and other entertainment properties, Broadway.com is one of the most comprehensive online ticketing destinations for live theatre, with access to hundreds of thousands of theatregoers who use the site, and it has an ability to gather information about their theatre-going habits. If a producer, for

example, wanted to know if tourists who have never been to an Off-Broadway show before will pay full price for their tickets, or if middle-aged women who have seen Lion King twice before will respond to a show's advertising poster, Broadway.com could quickly find out by reaching out to hundreds of respondents online.

At the company's helm is Joseph Craig, an enthusiastic 39-year-old with a passion for good theatre and great data, a potent combination that has some producers hooked. "I will not do another show without him in my advertising budget," says Ken Davenport, a producer of Altar Boyz, who credits Craig's research with the show's turnaround.

After surveying three different Altar Boyz audiences, Mr. Craig discovered some unexpected facts: first, that the show's Outer Circle Critics Award was a big plus, and second, that the description of one of the characters as a "nice Jewish boy" had appeal. In no time, the advertising incorporated the new information. Visitors to the Altar Boyz Web site (www.altarboyz.com) will now see a Star of David dangling conspicuously from the necklace of one of the animated characters and a large pop-up banner announcing their award.

Live Theatrical Events is by no means the first group to use market research in the live performance arena. Theatre organizations have for years organized focus groups to help illuminate who their patrons are. The difference between his company and others, according to Craig, is the sophistication of its analysis. Formerly an account executive at NRG, whose tasks included doing studies for movie industry giants like Disney and Paramount, Craig is adept at uncovering the habits and motivations of the entertainment-going public.

Some of his success lies in his vigilance. "We have a 70-percent in-theatre return rate," he says, referring to the yellow questionnaires he tapes onto seats at selected shows. "That's because we do little things to make sure we get them back." His "little things" include pencils stuck to each questionnaire and a big staff — sometimes seven or eight people, depending on the size of the house — who constantly circulate and encourage people to fill them out.

Then there are his questions. After two years of preparation, Craig has designed questionnaires that shed light on the habits of theatregoers. Take last year's survey of Off-Broadway theatres, commissioned by the League of American Theatres and Producers and the Theatre Development Fund. Among his findings: men proportionately hit Off-Broadway more frequently than Broadway, whereas tourists prefer the latter. Craig also targets younger members of an audience. Instead of rating a show as "excellent" or, "fair," kids are given a special questionnaire where they check off words like "Good," "Okay" or "I don't like it." A smiley face is included as an alternative choice.

Live Theatrical Events will typically survey three audiences — a matinee, a Friday evening and a weekend — so that they can get the widest demographic sampling. Primarily, their goal is to find out what the commonality is among those disparate groups and what drives ticket sales overall. Although there are always some surprise responses, there are some predictable responses, too. Like the fact that tourists usually want to see two things while visiting New York City: Ground Zero and a Broadway show. That matinee groups love the swinging chandelier in Phantom and everyone loves the turning wall in Les Misérables.

In addition to in-theatre focus groups, Live Theatrical Events will offer a Hot List, a biweekly survey of theatregoers who rate which actor they would like to see onstage; a Tracking Service, using online polls asking what shows people are aware of or interested in; and a Syndicated Service of research data that will be available for approximately \$800 per month.

Not everyone is convinced of the accuracy of such research. Six months after *Rent* opened in New York, its producer, Jeffrey Seller, was told by one such research group that his show had no brand recognition in Chicago. Subsequently, the Chicago show sold half a million dollars in ticket sales within the first day. "Chorus Line, Annie, Hair, Les Misérables, Rent," says Seller, as quoted in a New York Times article ("Nielsen Brings a New Marketing Strategy to Broadway" dated August 1, 2006). "Were any of those shows built by focus groups?"

Craig acknowledges that some theatre people see his work as cynical and unromantic, a sign that theatre has become assimilated into the mass culture.

But as content producers like Disney and Dreamworks are becoming increasingly active on Broadway, the stage is being set both literally and metaphorically.

Matthew Freeman, a New York-based playwright who authors a popular theatre blog (matthewfreeman.blogspot.com), believes the theatre world can benefit by using the tools of corporate marketers. “Because Disney markets Tarzan effectively, does that mean that those who want to bring a large audience to *Waiting for Godot* should attempt to do so with ancient methods?” asks Freeman. “I’m going to be straight up about my belief that rebranding Off-Off Broadway as ‘Indie Theatre’ is a very good idea.

“There’s no shame in the desire to bring people in the room to experience what you have to offer,” continues Freeman. “To offer it to the right people, to people who will appreciate it, you need to know where they are and how to reach them. Let’s not treat market research as some sort of untouchable evil. It’s there. Using the principles of modern media and marketing (perhaps without using awful yellow checklists) might do us all a bit of good.”

*Lisa Lipkin is a professional storyteller and freelance writer. She is the author of *Bringing the Story Home: The Complete Guide to Storytelling for Parents* (Norton, 2000).*