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Nielsen Brings a New Marketing Strategy to Broadway

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"Wicked" is a show for 14-year-old girls. At least that's what everybody on Broadway was saying. So one of the show's producers, David Stone, decided to hire a relatively new research firm called Live Theatrical Events to find out if the assumption was true.

The firm springs from a surprising source: Nielsen. Yes, Nielsen, as in television's Nielsen ratings. Live Theatrical Events is the product of a partnership between Nielsen National Research Group, or NRG, a corporate cousin of Nielsen's television-rating unit, and Broadway.com, the ticketing and theater news Web site.

Using Hollywood-style data mining techniques and the Internet to contact hundreds of thousands of theatergoers, Live Theatrical Events is changing the way shows are marketing themselves, on and off Broadway. And its managing director, Joseph Craig, who has a long history in the film industry, is quietly becoming a sought-after player in New York theater.

"I will not do another show without him in my advertising budget," said Ken Davenport, a producer who has turned to Mr. Craig's research both for his own show, "Altar Boyz," and for a large group of theater professionals that was formed this year to find out why Off Broadway sales are lagging.

There have been focus groups and audience surveys on Broadway for years, of course. Still, New York's theater world is, in many areas, years behind the other entertainment industries in the way it does business and finds customers. That's just fine with many of the veterans, who consider rigorous market research just another distraction from the art.

"I don't think it's hugely interesting, and I don't think everything can be translated into marketing," said Emanuel Azenberg, the longtime Broadway producer. "It's not selling Chevrolets."

But for producers like Mr. Stone and Mr. Davenport, the arrival of a market research powerhouse like Nielsen is a long-awaited development.

Which brings us back to "Wicked." At six performances in March, the Live Theatrical Events staff covered the 1,933-seat Gershwin Theater with questionnaires, getting about 6,100 back. That assumption about all the

adolescent girls, as it turns out, was false. In a report that ran 30 pages, Mr. Craig said that "in line with typical theatergoers, audience members were slightly more apt to be 35 and older."

Mr. Stone was pleasantly surprised. "To show something that flies in the face of what has become conventional wisdom," he said, "that's what you do this for."

Mr. Craig, 39, said that since the group opened for business in January 2005, he has done market research for at least 60 different shows, on and off Broadway, around the country and overseas. The next phase, which will be announced this week, is a syndicated service of research data to which producers and others in the theater business can subscribe for around \$750 a month.

The first product will be the "Hot List," a biweekly survey of hundreds of theatergoers around the country, rating which actors they would like to see onstage -- from theater veterans like Kristin Chenoweth to movie stars like Julia Roberts to up-and-comers like Amy Spanger, who is currently in "The Wedding Singer."

Mr. Craig is also planning to introduce a tracking service, which would deliver similar online polls asking what shows people are aware of and what shows they are most interested in seeing. Nielsen has been running tracking polls for the movies since the 1980's. They have become such a fundamental part of the industry that when a poll turns out to have significantly underestimated a movie's box-office potential -- as was the case earlier this year with the Jennifer Aniston movie "The Break-Up" -- it creates a small scandal.

What separates the Nielsen group, theater professionals say, is the sophistication of its analysis and the number of people it can reach.

"What's really exciting there is the ability to move from 12 at a time to hundreds at a time," said Drew Hodges, the creative director of SpotCo, a Broadway advertising agency that often uses Mr. Craig's research. "But what you need along with that is somebody who can really interpret that." Mr. Hodges added that there is some confidence that comes from being able to see members of a focus group from behind the one-way mirror.

The Nielsen research group began its involvement in live theater when Hollywood players like Disney began to bring their properties to the stage. The group had long done market research for movie studios and followed them east for occasional theater projects.

At the time Mr. Craig, an upbeat, shaggy-haired man who peppers his conversation with percentages, was working as a marketing analyst for NRG. Mr. Craig, who never finished high school, had over the years compiled a remarkable amount of arcane movie marketing data; after working for Paramount, he became a one-man Nielsen brain trust.

When NRG started dabbling on Broadway, he saw an opportunity and offered to start a new unit that focused on market research for independent films and theater. (About two-thirds of his research still revolves around independent films.) He spent a few years traveling between Los Angeles and New York testing research methods before announcing the creation of Live Theatrical Events in 2005.

"As Broadway becomes more expensive, they need to know who their audience is," Mr. Craig said. "Who's coming, who's not coming, and why not?"

The theater projects are relatively cheap. Producers typically pay around \$8,000 for an audience survey at three performances, including after-show focus groups, and a few dozen pages of analysis. The group also recruits tourists off the street for focus groups in its nondescript office at 1650 Broadway.

But the linchpin of Live Theatrical Events is its partnership with Broadway.com, which gives it access to hundreds of thousands of theatergoers who use the site and information about their theatergoing habits. If a producer wants to know, for instance, if a show's new advertising poster will appeal to middle-aged women outside New York who have seen "Mamma Mia!" twice, Broadway.com can get hold of 200 of them online.

Theater warhorses like Mr. Azenberg are not the only ones who question the value of polling. Jeffrey Seller, a producer of "Rent" and "Avenue Q," said his one experience with focus groups a few years ago had been enough to convince him that market research is, on the whole, worthless. A focus group indicated that "Rent," six months after its New York opening, had no brand recognition in Chicago -- an indication that was proved wrong when the show sold half a million dollars in tickets the first day they were on sale there.

It is almost impossible, Mr. Seller said, to predict how people will actually respond to advertising. "We're still in a business that is a strange intersection of art and commerce," he said. "But all of the great shows have been promoted and created through the gut aesthetic, artistic instincts of the creators and producers."

"'Chorus Line,' 'Annie,' 'Hair,' 'Les Misérables,' 'Rent,' " Mr. Seller added. "Were any of those shows built by focus groups?"

Just before a Monday night performance of "Altar Boyz," Mr. Craig and his team were at work, taping detailed questionnaires to all the seats and finding audience members for an informal 20-minute focus group after the show.

"I'm seeing a heavier concentration of men than I've seen before," Mr. Craig said, eyeballing the room.

This is the third survey Mr. Craig has done for "Altar Boyz." Among the findings of the first, an online poll: for whatever reason, people said they found the show's Outer Critics Circle Award appealing, and they liked the description of one of the characters as "a nice Jewish boy."

So now, among other changes, the redesigned "Altar Boyz" poster features a big red circle advertising the award and a conspicuous Star of David hanging from the Jewish character's neck. "The problem with our industry is we don't test, we don't rely on enough data," Mr. Davenport, the "Altar Boyz" producer, said.

Mr. Davenport and other producers said it was partly the romance of Broadway that kept it from adopting standard industry practices like market testing and in-depth audience research.

Mr. Craig insisted that he wants no part in any decision making when it comes to shows; he is only a data provider, he said. But that is not the way some of his clients see it. Mr. Davenport said he was partly relying on Mr. Craig's polling to choose his next development project, and even to see what elements of his projects are likely to grab people's fancy.

Mr. Davenport is so confident in the usefulness of the research that he introduced Mr. Craig to a group of 75 producers, managers and other professionals who had been meeting once a month this year to discuss the queasy financial state of Off Broadway theater.

The group, which was created by Beverley Mac Keen, the executive director of New World Stages, hired Mr. Craig to conduct a study, paid for by the League of American Theaters and Producers and the Theater Development Fund, which analyzed the audiences at 11 Off Broadway shows. With about 9,000 surveys, it was Live Theatrical Events' largest project yet.

Mr. Craig presented the analysis last week. There is a greater proportion of men in Off Broadway audiences compared with Broadway, he reported, and there are fewer tourists. Two-thirds of the audience members bought their tickets at a discount. And about half were not even aware that the show they were attending was part of something called Off Broadway.

The key, Mr. Craig said, was to market Off Broadway as an independent, risk-taking alternative to the big Broadway players, sort of like a theater version of Miramax, the movie studio that has often presented the smaller, more eccentric films that the big studios bypassed. The analogy was not surprising; after all, that's where Mr. Craig's whole project started.

"I know people hate it when I compare movies and theater," he said. "But they're still two entertainment choices."

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