

The New York Times

THEATER; You Saw The Show, Now Read The E-Mail

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Published: July 9, 2006

IF you were one of the 2,500 people who saw the Off Broadway musical "Altar Boyz" last week, its producer, Ken Davenport, probably has your number. Or at least, if you were among the 40 percent who bought your tickets online, he has your e-mail address. So don't be surprised when a thank-you message ("on behalf of Matthew, Mark, Luke, Juan and Abraham") shows up in your electronic mailbox Monday morning, including a discount offer for a return visit or to send to friends, "so that they too can fall in love with The Boyz, just like you have."

"The open rates on that e-mail are off the charts," Mr. Davenport said: more than 70 percent, in an industry where 30 percent is high. But the point isn't just to get you to open the message, it's really to push you to the show's Web site, where you might be tempted to join the Altarholics fan group ("Win big prizes and help spread the word"), take a trivia quiz, find out what your favorite cast member's favorite lunch meat is, sign up for a newsletter, click over to the show's official MySpace page or add to a list of "audience confessions" like, "I hate flan," or, more inspirationally, "I ditched 'Lestat' for 'Altar Boyz' again!"

In the old days -- about five years ago -- producers didn't know much about their audiences, who they were and how to reel them in (or back). They largely relied on direct mail and print advertising, communications that were one-way, not to mention expensive, scattershot and impersonal. The old-technology equivalents of Mr. Davenport's Monday morning e-mail blasts were the "bounceback" discount coupons blown into Playbills and usually left to confetti Times Square. The "Altar Boyz" messages are much "stickier": people apparently pay attention to them because they come across as personal and interactive. "When you see a show you love, the moment after you see it is the moment you're most excited about it," Mr. Davenport said. "My job is to capture that feeling, as close to the event as possible, and turn it into word of mouth."

Word of mouth has always been the ideal. But the Internet has provided a new and, some say, vastly improved set of tools to generate it: not just e-mail blasts but also Web sites, banner ads, search-engine pop-ups and blog coverage. In the last few years these tools have reshaped the way the theater reaches its audience.

The most obvious change is in ticketing, which the Internet makes simpler for customers and cheaper for producers. During the 2004-5 season the portion of Broadway tickets sold online more than quadrupled to 29 percent from 7 percent; this past season it continued to creep up, to about 33 percent. (For non-group ticket

sales, the figure is more than 60 percent.) The remaining tickets were purchased via phone, group-sales brokers, the TKTS booths and the old-fashioned box office, which now accounts for only one-quarter of purchases, making lines around the block mostly a thing of the past.

But that's just technical, a change in how people buy what they were going to buy anyway. A much bigger change involves tapping audience members' social networks to bring in entirely new theatergoers. This summer "The Color Purple" is rolling out a Web campaign called "Organize Your Group" to help families, schools, gospel choirs and churches arrange theatergoing "reunions"; an earlier form of this program has already referred more than 100,000 people to the show. In May "Avenue Q" filled some slow midweek houses by offering discounts to people who had visited its Web site. A single blast to 20,000 e-mail addresses netted \$40,000 in sales and cost almost nothing.

These new tools can be even more valuable for smaller shows, or those just finding their legs. Take "The Wedding Singer," which opened to mixed reviews in April but has gradually been gathering steam. A major campaign aimed at the show's youngish demographic not only through more or less traditional ads on theater, newspaper and wedding Web sites but also through "viral" marketing.

Like several other productions, "The Wedding Singer" offered free seats to the authors of various New York City-based blogs, hoping they would write about the experience if they liked it (or leave it alone if not). "I wouldn't go as far to say that 'The Wedding Singer' is the new 'Hairspray'," the blog Just Jared reported, "but it comes close." So it isn't Walter Winchell, but items like this (which often include photos and MP3 downloads provided by the producers) have driven thousands of new visitors to various shows' Web sites, and thence to the shows, for the cost of a few orchestra seats.

Getting potential customers to the official Web site -- as opposed to independent ticket-selling or scalper sites -- is the big goal. Not only because of direct purchases (a hit show like "The Color Purple" can generate \$150,000 a week in ticket sales from 200,000 monthly site visits) but also because the producers can harvest e-mail addresses, measure traffic and monitor patterns as they develop and change.

From 9 p.m. to 10 p.m. on June 11 -- the hour during which its catchy opening number was performed on the Tony Awards broadcast -- visits to the "The Wedding Singer" site nearly quintupled; within a day the show experienced a nearly threefold bump in ticket sales. What was really extraordinary, said Margo Lion, the show's lead producer, is that three-quarters of those sales came through the Internet, where a Google search of the phrase "wedding singer" returns as its first item an ad box leading to the official site.

"The Wedding Singer" pays to make sure that will happen. (The ad costs about 16 cents per appearance, but only if someone clicks on it; other phrases, like "wedding singer Broadway tickets" can cost much more.) Damian Bazadona, the president of Situation Marketing, the company that directs the show's Internet efforts, said the effect can be "staggering."

A four-month Google ad campaign he ran for "Doubt" (a title that would otherwise be hopeless on a search engine) cost about \$15,000 and sold more than \$400,000 worth of full-price tickets, not including sales that were initiated on the Internet but completed by phone. "With direct mail," Mr. Bazadona said, "you consider it a success if you double your cost, or just break even."

When he started the company in 2001, Mr. Bazadona was its sole employee, working from home. "When I'd talk about the Web," he recalled, producers "looked at me like I had three heads." Now, although the operation remains unglamorous (seven cramped employees downing doughnut holes and coffee while staring at monitors in a building on West 38th Street), Situation Marketing handles more than half of all new Broadway shows and bills them more than \$1 million a year. A typical new musical's Web campaign may cost \$100,000 to set up and \$10,000 to \$15,000 a week to maintain. Still, such numbers represent only 3 percent to 5 percent of most shows' marketing budgets, a figure that Mr. Bazadona, with some prejudice, would prefer to see at 10 percent.

Which makes the people who handle traditional advertising "antsy," as one producer put it. They have noticed that some Off Broadway shows, those little skiffs that can turn more quickly than Broadway's steamers, have transferred almost all of their marketing budgets to the Web. "Naked Boys Singing," and also "Altar Boyz" and "The Awesome 80's Prom" (both produced by Mr. Davenport), have seen sales rise while giving up print altogether, except for the daily listings in The New York Times. "A full-page ad can't have music, video clips and all my reviews, like I can have on my Web site, where I'm also not competing with all the ads next to it," Mr. Davenport said. "My chance of converting a sale dramatically increases, and for much less money."

How much less? For a few thousand dollars, a show can buy a 100,000-name list of theatergoers from Telecharge and blast each name an e-mail advertisement. (If the names come from the show's own site, they're free.) For a small production, larger print ads are mostly out of reach anyway.

A Web site is not only cheaper than a large newspaper ad, it's also chiefly a one-time expense, pointed out Jeff Bowen, a principal in Late August Design, which manages Internet campaigns for "Wicked" and "The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee" as well as "[title of show]," of which Mr. Bowen is a costar and coauthor. "On the other hand you can't hurl your Web site onto people's front porches, much as producers would like that to happen," he said. "All you can do is keep putting the show in front of their eyes."

Wherever they may be. Mr. Bowen, Mr. Bazadona and Mr. Davenport all maintain presences for their shows at sites like MySpace and Friendster, where younger fans, who no longer look to television or magazines very much to feed their theatrical interests, can share information and gather into virtual communities. And it's not just kids. Mr. Bazadona, who is 30, was surprised to find, by checking server data, that a lot of his page views were coming at lunchtime, from people at work.

But Web marketing may be most effective as a means of reaching the uninitiated and giving them a way to convert their curiosity into action. "If you lived in Missouri 10 years ago," said Mr. Bazadona, who himself had no theatrical background when he started his company, "even if you saw a number from a Broadway musical on the 'Today' show and loved it, what would you do?" Now you would turn to your computer and use a search

engine to get to the show's Web site, listen to other songs, sign up for information about a future tour or even plan a trip to New York to see it. "By opening up an instantaneous channel for those with casual interest," Mr. Bazadona said, "the Web may develop the future audience."

So if Web marketing is so powerful, why haven't ticket sales already blown through the roof? It was an excellent season financially for Broadway, with both attendance and profits increasing significantly, and part of the credit for keeping more seats occupied at higher prices surely goes to the Internet. But even Mr. Bazadona admits that despite the ability to measure e-mail open rates, linked "click-throughs," page visits and other details of site traffic from minute to minute, no one really knows for sure what effect anything is having.

Some users tune out online advertising. Some e-mail blasts bomb. Some technology integration is a big headache. "There is a lot of evidence to suggest that if not created and implemented correctly," Mr. Bazadona said, "you are really throwing your money away."

As some producers chase new technology to fill seats -- Mr. Davenport is already experimenting with text-message blasts for "Altar Boyz" -- others wonder whether that chase will alter the content of the shows being promoted. If the theater were as Darwinian as other media, you might see a growing trend toward the kind of productions that benefit from online strategies: plays and musicals designed to appeal to wired teenagers and high-twitch adults.

But that trend is not happening. More than film, more than television, more than the Internet itself, theater will always, at least to some extent, be about people risking ridiculous odds in the hope of sharing their passions with an inexorably small number of like-minded souls. And it's possible that, in the end, all the Internet will do is give them a more public way to grasp at virtual straws.

Article published July 9, 2006

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