

Marketing Strategy 2008 - 2012

MANAGING THE CHALLENGES

(As times change we must change with them).

Background

An Grianán Theatre has been open for nine years in an area which had not had a major receiving or producing theatre before. As the theatre enters its 10th year much has changed in the economic landscape: the Celtic Tiger has come and gone leaving little mark on Donegal. The county still has the same problems of poor transport infrastructure and a thinly dispersed population, the highest unemployment rate and the lowest incomes in the country. Significant competitors for the local audience have arisen since the theatre opened: The Millennium Forum in Derry, The new Balor Arts Centre in Ballybofey, the Alley Theatre in Strabane, the Strule Arts Centre in Omagh and the Regional Cultural Centre adjoining the theatre in Letterkenny. The Abbey Centre in Ballyshannon may be added to this list if current efforts to invigorate the venue pay off.

Nonetheless An Grianán is ready for the challenges ahead. The theatre's current active mailing list contains 11,000 known bookers and it occupies a place of significant positivity among our patrons and the local population both within Donegal and neighbouring counties. The intimate auditorium, the excellent staff and the well-balanced programme all contribute towards the theatre being seen as an excellent night out for entertainment. The theatre's acoustics have often been cited among music buffs as the best in the country. Not least by Oscar winning songwriter Glen Hansard who said of the auditorium

'.....it's where magic happens.....'

The number of local groups and schools who wish to use the theatre for their events also reflects a very positive opinion of the theatre.

Achievements and Challenges

Against this backdrop An Grianán has made significant developments in gaining and maintaining an audience for Drama, Comedy, Dance, Music and Visual Arts. A varied and exciting programme, both artistic and popular, sometimes both has allowed us to pull from all sectors of the community from ages 4 to 84. We are pleased to have a very significant 18- 40 audience, which largely comes for the comedy and popular music but also attends drama.

Audiences Share vs. Financial Gain

For most genres Audience Share corresponds on a 1:1 basis with financial income. Comedy provides a much higher financial benefit: with 17% of audience capacity and 32% of financial income from only 15% of performances. Clearly this is an important market for us and looking at the trends within this genre it's easy to see which comedy sells best: Irish Comedians who have had significant recent Irish T.V. exposure. English and American comedians do not have the same impact, although they often provide a higher quality performance. On the other side of things Family and Popular Musicals give us the highest percentage of our total performances with 32% and yield 35% of our total audiences but only 29% of income. From this we can see that developing greater audiences does not necessarily increase financial gain for certain types of shows. While we will always strive to maximise the financial gain from all shows, for some of the artistic programme, such as modern dance, the emphasis will be much more on gaining higher audiences for performances, and as price may be a tool used to entice people in, we may gain greater audiences for these shows but it may mean no gain in financial terms.

The Current Financial Climate

The economic downturn will accelerate and concentrate An Grianán on a process that has been ongoing- ie. using Marketing and Programming hand in hand to maximise income and attendances. This may by necessity push some of those choices, which are made on artistic grounds, to be passed over. The slow down in the Irish economy could impact the theatre along five important income streams. Grant income from the Arts Council, Letterkenny Town Council and Donegal County Council may be reduced and earned income from sponsorship and box office could reduce.

We may in likelihood have to focus our resources and staff time more on income generation, rather than audience development for more challenging shows, and shows will have to be more harshly judged before programming them. We need to ask where the audience exists for each project before confirming into the season. It is no longer enough to say a similar show in the boom times did this number and expect it to do so again. Times have changed and we must change with them. Each show we programme must be weighed up firstly in terms of 'can we get an audience for this?', with a clear strategic plan for how to get this audience. Predicted audiences could be recorded and later examined against the actual attendance so that we can improve our knowledge for future programming. We already know that pricing, timing and 'room to breathe' are critical to a show's audience attainment. We can further refine our knowledge of these by tracking attainment levels.

Audience Development

This work is time consuming and gives little financial benefit to the theatre, nonetheless it is critical to our very purpose of existence and should not be sidelined.

We have seen strides made in this over the past nine years and can positively point to the audiences attained by The Abbey, Druid, Rough Magic, and The Gate, all between 70% and 100% in recent years. This shows that the marketing of these companies as those with 'exceptional quality' has paid off in terms of numbers through the door and indeed on financial grounds too. If these touring companies are available in 2009 we can be confident that we can celebrate our 10th anniversary with quality programming. We need to extend this category in people's minds to other companies we hold in high esteem such as The Lyric, especially in light of our co- production of Brian Friel's The Home Place early in the New Year, but also in the fields of dance, opera, music, etc.

Every challenge presents an opportunity and the economic situation presents significant potential for dialogue with our audiences and for raising the efficiency and effectiveness of our operation. It could lead to the identification of significant new audiences. Through this engagement we can hope that our audience will feel more responsible for the theatre and feel an obligation to attend or to arrange audiences for events.

We need to talk to schools so that we are finding and programming the shows that they want to attend. It may be that the days of our Christmas Show are numbered, as the schools are the main market for these projects. While this would be a sad development, it could open up other opportunities to do shows, which may earn us revenue and so lighten the financial burden at such a critical time of year. We are committed to the exciting Snow Queen Project for Christmas 2009 and will start our marketing for this in February 2009, using the company as extensively as possible throughout the year to promote the show in the schools.

One idea which we will implement in the New Year is a dedicated teacher's marketing plan: to be implemented mainly by the new technologies: email, web site, etc. So much of our marketing to school seems to fall at the first hurdle and teachers often report that they have not seen it. By being able to send them information directly into their email inbox we should reap the benefits of increased interest and co-operation. This campaign will be backed up by positive reinforcements such as special offers, competitions etc.

Marketing Tools and Developments

It remains of primary importance to us that we reflect the excellence on the stage through our marketing and customer care and we have done much to develop this. To this end we revamped our corporate identity and the 'character on a stage' designed by the excellent Rathmullan Company Carton Le Vert went on to win a European Design Award. We have developed a special version of this logo, which will embrace our tenth anniversary.

Our main marketing tool is still the Brochure. We produce a high quality brochure three times a year, and print 30,000 of these each time. We have cut this from four times a year at an estimated saving of 12,000 euros. Our brochure is widely distributed through central distribution points such as shops and libraries, and posted to previous bookers. We also use Radio ads, newspapers ads and features to promote our activities. Although we have reduced our reliance on paid advertising and increased our editorial share in the papers through excellent relationships with editors and journalists across all the major local papers.

All the theatre's Box Office staff, most of whom are long term employees, are well versed in the programme of events and in actively selling, and take responsibility for the Friends Scheme, Group bookings and the Web site and email. The box office and front of house are often the public's first point of contact with An Grianán. We take pride in greeting customers warmly and being helpful. We see retention of good staff as a very important part of this strategy. The Box Office team uses the computerized system Databox, and are given extensive training in it. This system collates a large amount of marketing information, which is used to target mail shots and special offers.

The major advance of the past few years has been the development of new technologies: our website and our email marketing. The website, designed and maintained in house by Nicola Burns is excellent and drives much of the online booking. Google has just upgraded it to a high 6 rating, a great achievement which reflects very high traffic and positive linking to it.

Currently our online booking is handled by our Ticketing software provider Tickets.com but we have commissioned a software writer to write our own software, which while it will mean an initial outlay of 1500- 2500 Euros will give us control and the potential to make a very significant income from this service. We have registered the website www.theboxoffice.ie and will be able to make this facility, at a cost, available to any other promoter who does not currently have, or is not happy with, their current online provider. It is envisaged that it would be an easy fit for those companies for whom we already sell tickets: The Regional Cultural Centre and the Earagail Arts Festival, while the Bluestacks Festival and the Balor Arts Centre have both said they would like to use it. We would also aim to promote this service to commercial promoters such as Highland Radio, JW Promotions etc.

Our email marketing is still being developed and is currently at c.1200 bookers. While it would be tempting to think that this low cost and eco- friendly service would replace the physical mail shot, current analysis of booking after a mail shot still shows the physical letter is much more effective. We do expect this to change over time. It does add new strings to the bow of our marketing, particularly to get across late offers and availability. The statistics provided by our email management company show that the more frequently you send out the emails the less they are opened and so the temptation to keep sending out offers must be tempered by the knowledge that it is damaging the effectiveness of the service.

Marketing Aims 2008 - 2012

1/ To maintain and increase audiences for the artistic programme.

Audience Development for the artistic programme has not developed to its full potentials. We need to improve this to justify these shows coming to our theatre. So development of this audience has to be one of the major priorities for the theatre in the coming years. This is not an easy task and it takes more than ordinary marketing approaches to bring people in. It is about education, nurturing, development, and dialogue; we need to hear from our audience what they will attend, and what they will pay for it. We are currently looking at ways of getting behind the 'white noise', getting directly to customers and making them take notice of our shows over and above all the other shows out there. Again the new technologies will drive this forward.

2/ To promote the artistic work done by the theatre.

There's no point having a significant artistic programme if we do not maximize promotion and publicity at all levels. Extensive coverage in all local media outlets needs to be maintained. New community outlets for posters, flyers and email advertising need to be sourced. The development of the Plaza project should also be a significant tool for this. Currently we are drawing up a ten-year plan to completely transform the Plaza making it into an artistic and tourist attraction.

3/ To maximise the commercial potential of all shows.

It's important for the commercial programme to attain as high sales as possible. This is now more critical than ever. The idea is the maximum income for the minimum financial outlay.

4/ To maintain the high attendance from the surrounding area.

We have a very well developed market within an hours drive of us and have a good public profile within the community. This has been eroded in recent years by new theatre developments in close geographic proximity to the theatre. Nonetheless if the programme is strong enough people should attend An Grianán. We should also look more to the West of the county for audiences, as we are the closest theatre to this area.

5/ To promote the commercial potential of the building.

It is important to get maximum use out of the building both the auditorium and meeting rooms for commercial use such as conferences, meetings and exhibitions. This will maximise earned income.

Practical steps

1/ We shall continue our development of the new technologies, our website, email service and online booking.

2/ We should source more poster sites, which offer visibility by the roadsides. Currently we are using a billboard on the Port Road, thanks to the generosity of Letterkenny Kia, but this is only a temporary measure. The digital sign has made a huge difference for us outside our own building.

3/ We continue to keep an eye on paid advertising and the fluctuating market positions of the various media, while Highland Radio has proven to be less relevant to our audience than expected our contra deal with them is still very valuable to us and we work to maintain it.

4/ Posters/ Brochure distributions. As before it would be good to improve poster distribution but it is a time consuming activity, which needs a car driver to do it. Nonetheless concentrating on areas such as Fanad, and the N11 towns, areas where we are the first theatre they come to could be of great benefit to us.

5/ Shows face internal competition from other shows in our season. This is more acute amongst the Drama programme. While considerable strides have been taken on addressing this ourselves in the past few years we now need to look at it in light of the other venues around us. An Anti Clash diary has been introduced in principle by ourselves, The Balor and The Regional Cultural Centre, this should be implemented as soon as is practically possible in early 2009.

6/ With so many venues within easy reach, we should investigate the potential for cooperative work and programming.

7/ The Friends scheme has been revamped under Marian Funston who has put great energy and dedication into it. This will hopefully develop further in the coming years.

Targets:

The current economic climate and its impact on the Arts means that maintaining our excellent record will be a challenge in itself. We should still look to increase our attendances at the new drama, contemporary dance and schools shows. We should also be looking for more financial take from the more popular programme.

- We aim to achieve attendances of 68% at An Grianán in 2009. This represents a 4% increase on 2007 and we aim to achieve this by targeting higher capacity shows such as comedy, family entertainments and high profile dramas
- For new drama by non- elite companies (evening shows) we should be looking to have at least 30% occupancy, currently 27%. This should be achievable by programming shows which target identified audiences, and through strategies of pricing and placement in the actual programme. In these instances financial attainment will be a secondary concern to audience attainment. The logic of this will dictate that many of these shows should be for one night only, unless we perceive it to have enough identified customers who will attend. We have found that word of mouth takes a number of days to significantly influence bookings, and indeed needs a strong first audience to generate that word of mouth.
- For Schools Shows we should be looking at shows, which can attain 50% occupancy. Again pricing and timing of the shows will be critical to their success, as will dialogue with the schools themselves.
- For contemporary Dance we shall aim for 25% audience capacity, currently 17.5%. Again this development can only happen with significant dialogue with interested parties and through the work of a dedicated officer.