AUDIENCE DEVELOPMENT OF THEATRES: 
A CASE STUDY OF 
CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN THEATRE COMPANY 
COLUMBUS, OH

A Thesis
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by
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ABSTRACT

Audience development is an often-studied topic, crucial to theatre’s survival. However, much of the available literature deals with advice to theatres or analyses of surveys of current and past audience members. I felt that an in-depth study of one theatre could illustrate the on-going problems while allowing opportunities for unique problems to arise. I also talked to non-attenders, an elusive audience segment.

I used a case study of CATCO to allow me to fully understand a given theatre and its audience. I interviewed key staff and volunteers, observed committee meetings and reviewed written documents to get the theatre’s perspective. I used four focus groups to get the audience’s perspective: (1) subscribers, (2) single-ticket buyers, (3) former subscribers and (4) non-attenders.

I found that the subscribers are committed to theatre and loyal to CATCO. The former subscribers enjoyed theatre but lacked the loyalty to maintain a subscription over the long-term. The single-ticket buyers preferred the freedom and variety of the entire Columbus arts scene and did not wish to be tied down to subscriptions. The non-attenders either
did not think they would enjoy CATCO’s offerings or did not have the requisite information to make a decision.

Several factors emerged. The quality of the productions is essential but not enough. More information was required, more marketing through a variety of medium and a larger presence on the World Wide Web. In short, the focus group attendees wanted ease of access, ease of information and minimum effort on their part. One surprising note is a “need” for subscriptions. The attendees believe that subscriptions are essential for ensuring attendance. The “I’ve paid for it; I’m going to use it” idea.

CATCO itself conducts regular surveys of its audience. Though it does not generally question non-attenders, this was a brief glimpse into their minds as well. This information, combined with what it already has, is a solid base for understanding its audience. However, this is only the first step. Information alone is not enough. CATCO must commit resources and take action.
DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my family.

My beloved husband is my inspiration.
He provided support, encouragement and editing.
His belief in me never wavered.

My beloved son is my joy and delight.
He reminds me that families are more important than papers,
however big.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

"The primary aim of all research is to further human understanding."
—Barone and Eisner

The purpose of this thesis is to gain a deeper understanding of the factors that lie behind audience attendance at the theatre. In order to focus this study while still providing relevant research, I have conducted a case study of audience development within a single theatre: Contemporary American Theatre Company (CATCO) of Columbus, OH.

I examined the theatre’s audience development expectations and techniques, using these as a basis for understanding audience development within this theatre and within theatre in general. I then conducted research, through focus groups, to learn what actual CATCO audience members thought. My effort primarily was about understanding the audience; this interest is both personal and professional, stemming in part from a growing realization that while theatre has been an important part of my life, identification with the
theatre has not always translated into attendance or participation, even for me. Further, I believe that a thorough understanding of audience motivations is essential for a strong audience-theatre relationship.

The non-profit as well as the for-profit theatre community depends on its audience for its very survival. While this seems an obvious point, it is easy to forget amid the hustle and bustle of daily theatre life: solving urgent financial crises, paying bills, selling tickets, and making artistic choices. Yet, the importance of the audience dictates that audience development be given particular emphasis in any strategic, long-term planning—whether financial or artistic—that a theatre may undertake.

Acknowledging the importance of the issue does not always provide an action plan. Given that there are many components and factors that affect audience development, how do arts organizations develop and maintain their audience? Embedded in this question are many others. Kotler and Scheff (1997) begin with a laundry list of questions, among them:

- How can an arts organization attract and develop new audience members?
- How can an arts organization increase the frequency of attendance of its current audiences?
- How can an arts organization develop a better understanding of its customers: their interests, attitudes, and motivations?
- How do they package the arts, present it to people in ways that make them want to come?

For the purpose of this study, the questions I considered were:
• How does CATCO develop and maintain its audience?
• Does CATCO use promotion, publicity, marketing, public relations, communications and educational programs, as defined by Morison and Dalgleish?
• Is programming a conscious consideration in attracting and keeping audience?
• Is CATCO doing anything that can benefit other theatres?
• What are other theatres doing that could benefit CATCO?
• What motivates current and potential audience members?
• From the perspective of the audience, what choices could CATCO make to increase attendance?

AUDIENCE DEVELOPMENT

There are many factors involved in developing an audience. One of these, marketing, is standard practice in the for-profit business world, where the term “customer” rather than “audience” is used. Yet the concept of marketing is becoming increasingly accepted in the arts, including theatre. “Marketing” may sometimes be used synonymously with “audience development” (Franz, 1999), but marketing is not the only way to attract audiences. For example, programming is another part of the equation. While audience development doesn’t require “pandering” to the audience or losing control of content, it does mean creating a discussion that includes the audience. Other factors involved in audience development include public relations, educational programs and promotion. I am using the phrase “audience development” as Morison and Dalgleish (1993) use it: “in its broadest possible interpretation—as an ‘umbrella’ term to encompass all aspects of
promotion, publicity, marketing, public relations, communications and educational programs” (p. 7). In addition to the aspects listed by Morison and Dalgleish, I also examined programming as an essential feature of audience development and I briefly reviewed technology as an important issue for the present as well as the future.

We live in a competitive, market economy, with many companies vying for the consumer's dollar. Theatres are increasingly aware that they are vying not just with each other for those dollars, but also with other organizations. Other activities on which audience members spend their “disposable” income include movies, television and sports, with tickets to the movies, for instance, often costing less than tickets to the theatre or the ballet.

There has been much discussion in the literature about the potential size of arts audiences. Most of the increases in arts participation over the past few decades have come from population increases. As population growth has leveled off, so have the audience gains in the arts. Kotler and Scheff (1997) say that “audience size remains stagnant at best, and in many areas is shrinking” (p. 9). This statement holds true, not only for the arts as a whole, but for theatre audiences as well (Robinson, 1993). The current birth rate in America is just under 2.0 per woman—slightly below replacement level. The combination of a decreasing birth rate with increasing immigration and
increasing life expectancy, points toward a drastically different level of ethnic diversity and a steadily rising average age in the 21st century.

These trends could affect the arts in various ways. With increasing numbers of older Americans, arts could experience a resurgence in attendance and prestige. However, Lehman (1996) sounds a warning against such optimism. Lehman believes that the Baby Boomers will continue to follow prior patterns and support the arts at lower levels than previous generations, even when they become the older audience. This is certainly an idea that needs the attention of those involved in producing art for consumption in the next century.

Whether one is an optimist or a pessimist, however, one question is critically important: How do arts organizations succeed in a competitive, changing environment? Developing a wider audience base is one answer, as are specialization and audience segmentation. Regardless of the goal, however, the first step is always to acquire more information about trends, and about one's own particular audience.

Although the arts is composed of many different disciplines, I have chosen to focus primarily on the performing arts because of the unique logistics required to create an audience that all must be present together at a particular time. This is perhaps the biggest audience development hurdle within the arts. I have chosen to focus in particular on theatre because of my personal interest in this medium. Choosing
one primary discipline allowed me the opportunity to explore its needs, issues and opportunities at greater depth. However, it also limited the generalizability of the study. Choosing one theatre—CATCO—also allowed me to explore in greater depth the factors contributing to audience development, while admittedly also limiting the generalizability of my study.

**DEFINITIONS**

Before I begin, I must define some of the key terms used in this study. These definitions emerged from the literature that I will be discussing shortly.

- **Audience Development**—techniques and attitudes designed to maintain or increase audience share. This encompasses all aspects of promotion, publicity, marketing, public relations, communications, educational programs and programming;

- **Educational Programming**—any aspect of the theatre that purports to "educate," including, but not limited to, classes, pre-show talks, special class shows, school visits, coordinated curriculum;

- **Marketing**—process of conception, pricing, promotion and distribution (place) of the programming (product) of the theatre;

- **Programming**—the plays produced by the theatre;

- **Promotion**—a function of informing, persuading and influencing the consumer's decision;

- **Public Relations**—this refers to a firm's communications and relationships with its various publics;

- **Publicity**—as a part of public relations, refers to the “stimulation of demand for a good, service, place, idea, person, or organization
by unpaid placement of commercially significant news or favorable media presentations” (Boone & Kurtz, 1999, p. 573).

LITERATURE

A quick look at the available books and journals reveals ample literature on audience analysis in the arts. The beginning of regularly collected national audience data was with the start of the Surveys of Public Participation in the Arts (SPPA) in 1982. This series of surveys continued in 1985 and 1992; all were funded by the NEA and conducted by U.S. Bureau of the Census.

The most recent SPPA was completed in 1997, but there has not yet been much literature analyzing that recent data. Complicating matters is the fact that some of the categories included in the survey are not completely comparable to the earlier studies due to differences in the study design. However, the NEA’s Research Division Note #70 (1998) briefly discusses adult attendance at arts performances and exhibitions. While the data is certainly important, much of it is still in rough form and can appear inaccessible to arts administrators who may be looking for answers about their own audience.

On the other hand, there exists a large body of literature that analyzes the data from the three earlier SPPAs; most of this work focuses on various independent variables. For example, race is the focus of Paul J. DiMaggio and Francie Ostrower’s (1990) “Participation
in the Arts by Black and White Americans,” while age is analyzed in *Age and Arts Participation with a Focus on the Baby Boom Cohort* by Erin V. Lehman (1996). These analyses are helpful in understanding the data presented in the SPPA reports, and are particularly useful in understanding national demographic trends; such information can be correlated with locally gathered data to understand how a specific locality compares to the national average.

An important general analysis of the local Columbus arts culture can be found in Louise Stevens’ (1998) *Greater Columbus Arts Council: Cultural and Arts Market Analysis Study*. This project provides a rich look at the arts and culture audiences in the Columbus metropolitan area. It is especially useful in its ability to compare cross-audiences—people who attend more than one type of arts or cultural event. Stevens’ data could be used by theatres to target mailings more accurately, thereby offering the chance of growing an audience with increased efficiency. (It should also be noted that the Stevens study contains some relevant comments on Columbus’ poor arts reputation; this has implications for any arts organization in Columbus, not just theatres.)

The SPPA reports, and the analyses that flow from them, provide essential aggregate data. This aggregate data even begins to touch on barriers to attendance. But to gain a more complete picture of CATCO’s audience, I chose to set up a series of focus groups that would give
audience members the opportunity to give feedback through with individualized answers. This allows more unexpected and outlier data to surface than would, say, a standardized survey.

There have been in-depth, qualitative studies on theatre audiences. For example, the Lila-Wallace Foundation has sponsored a series of reports that take a close look at several theatres’ audience development practices with regard to specified topics such as marketing, programming and diversification. These reports give the details that make the concepts come alive, and they could be very helpful to someone who wanted to try the ideas for themselves. But they stop short of asking the audience members what motivates them, what drives them to attend or avoid theatre. I wanted to hear directly from the audience members themselves, as well as from the theatre and its professionals.

There is a wide body of literature that attempts to educate and/or prescribe a remedy to arts organizations’ managerial woes. These include Kotler and Scheff’s (1997) work and Morison and Dalgleish’s (1993) book. Most arts organizations could find something useful in these books, which cover a variety of topics, including marketing and audience research. Again, such material may be interesting or even helpful, but it is a one-way communication, from the “expert” to the arts leader, bypassing the audience entirely. Although these works include
discussions of how to analyze an audience, there are no reports on audience opinions, attitudes or interests.

These examples of literature on audience development illustrate my areas of research. My literature review is composed of three categories: audience composition, audience understanding and advice. Obviously, more literature exists than I have highlighted in this chapter. I will expand on the available literature in Chapter 2.

**METHODOLOGY**

"The arts" is an ambiguous phrase used to discuss a diverse collection of individuals and groups. As Brent Wilson (1997) puts it, "the art world has myriad components whose relationships to one another are highly complex" (p. 17). It is possible to collect quantitative data on groups of companies of almost any size or type or within any particular type of relationships, determine which ones are successful, and then make hypotheses about why they are successful. Such hypotheses can be very useful in attempting to understand the "highly complex" art world.

However, a hypothesis is not always enough. Raw data, even filtered through analysis and interpretation, tells the story in aggregate. Sometimes a greater wealth of information can be gleaned through a single case study.
To study the particular is to study the general. For this reason, any case will necessarily bear the traces of the universal; consequently, there is less interest in the traditional positivist and postpositivist concerns with negative cases, generalizations, and case selection. The researcher assumes that readers will be able, as Robert Stake argues, to generalize subjectively from the case in question to their own personal experiences. (Denzin & Lincoln 1994, p. 202)

This ability to “generalize subjectively,” or “transferability,” as Denzin and Lincoln call it, refers to the ability of the reader to filter information and take what is personally useful. When transferability occurs, the reader thinks: “This could fit in with our goals. This is what we need to try.”

Detailed quantitative studies have their place and can be very helpful in understanding one’s field, community or organization, but they don’t always provide the richness of an in-depth, qualitative study. To make informed decisions, different types of information are essential. Barone and Eisner (1997) note that “different frameworks provide different pictures. Different pictures make different kinds of understanding possible” (p. 86). Due to the availability of quantitative data on theatre audiences, I felt an in-depth qualitative study could contribute to understanding Columbus’ theatre audience.

My study is similar to the research funded by the Lila Wallace-Reader’s Digest Fund, the Building Audiences series, in which multiple case studies were used to build information on particular topics—marketing, diversifying audiences and programming. For example, to
understand how theatres deal with change in building and diversifying audiences, many sources were analyzed: numerous theatre groups and extensive interviews with various artistic directors and playwrights. While these studies focused on several organizations and individuals based on a particular topic within audience development, I studied one company and examined their general audience development strategies, techniques and results.

The results from the Building Audiences series were intriguing, with discussions of a wealth of strategies and techniques but they stopped short of directly asking audience members why they attend. For example, Second Stage Theatre is profiled in How Theaters Deal with Change in Building, Diversifying Audiences (1997). Several details are shared about how the troupe experienced increased attendance by students and teens, but these people were not asked directly why they began attending more (p. 5). Perhaps it was a direct result of the theatre’s actions; perhaps not. In my study, I talked with both the theatre and the audience.

PARTICIPANTS AND FORMAT

For the purposes of this study, I focused on theatres—specifically, “mid-sized” theatres. I adapted the sizes of theatres as defined by Theatre Communications Group (TGC) (Voss et al., 1998). TCG groups theatre into five categories of which I combined the two largest and the
two smallest; large theatres (those with budgets over $4 million, mid-sized theatres (with budgets between $1 million and $4 million), and small theatres (with budgets less than $1 million.) Large theatres get public attention, and some have grown significantly in recent years, but "many mid-sized ... theaters have ambitious growth plans, too. Even though their efforts are focused on expanding the size of their current audiences, it’s often a harder task because their marketing capacity doesn’t match the level of [large] theaters" (Building Audiences: Marketing, 1997, p. 5). Thus, my attraction to mid-sized organizations for this study; they traditionally have more difficulties developing audiences due to their constraints in marketing capacity and resources.

"While the facts provided [in Theatre Communication’s Group Annual Fiscal Survey] depict an industry that is healthy on the whole, a downturn in the economy could quickly precipitate a downturn in the industry’s health" (Voss et al., 1998, p. 11). Since it is difficult to predict future economic trends accurately, it can be a significant risk for a mid-sized theatre to spend additional money on expansion. Studies of specific theatres which are making strides in audience development could assist other mid-sized theatres, by offering them examples of effective strategies as they seek to stabilize or grow. I believe this kind of research will be a valuable addition to the field.
The site of my study is Columbus, Ohio, due to convenience, costs and time factors. I chose a specific organization to which I have access and entrée, Contemporary American Theatre Company (CATCO). CATCO has been particularly accommodating to my data-gathering needs.

CATCO is a mid-sized (budget between $1 & $4 million) theatre company struggling with the competitive market environment in Columbus. In the past few years, CATCO has seen a gradual decrease in the effectiveness of its basic marketing according to Rick Hole, Business Manager. The number of subscriptions are down from a high of 1700 three years ago to just over 1400 this season, and CATCO’s own estimates of single ticket purchases is often too high (Hole, 1999).

CATCO’s situation is consistent with national trends; ticket sales either are stagnant or decreasing for most theatres around the country (Kotler & Scheff, 1997, p. 7). Theatre Communication Group’s Annual Fiscal Survey shows an increase in the number of performances combined with an increase in attendance, but “the growth in number of performances [outpaced] the growth in attendance” (Voss et al., 1998, p. 10, italics added). Particularly significant in this analysis is the fact that the growth in attendance was primarily located in touring productions with aggregate attendance for “main series” actually showing a slow, steady decrease from 1995 to 1997.
I feel it may be time for CATCO to move from a “sales orientation” to a “marketing orientation” (Boone and Kurtz, 1999, p. 12-13). CATCO is poised to implement a new marketing plan designed to increase attendance and market share, and has hired a new marketing director. However, it is important to remember that audience development incorporates not only marketing, but also promotion, publicity, public relations, communications, educational programs, and programming. All of these factors will be relevant as we examine CATCO’s audience development.

Additionally, any plan or change involving a goal so central to an organization’s success must include all relevant departments, to assure “ownership” of the process and the results. Here, we can compare what CATCO is considering to what it has tried in the past, as well as to what other theatres have attempted. With a thorough understanding of the past success of audience analysis, and a good review of current information, we can gain a clearer picture of the place of audience development at CATCO.

**METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION**

This research study included four methods of gathering data. I used key informant interviews, focus groups, observation and document analysis. These four techniques provided “methodological triangulation: the use of multiple methods to study a single problem” (Janesick, 1994,
p. 215). Furthermore, within each data-collecting method, I also used “data triangulation: the use of a variety of data sources in a study” (Janesick, 1994, p. 214).

I began with interviews with key CATCO staff and volunteers—Geoff Nelson, Artistic Director; Rick Hole, Business Manager; Nancy Fox Chrstos, Education Director; and Tim Miller, Chair of the Audience Development Committee. With these interviews I sought to gain an overall sense of the priority CATCO gives its on audience development efforts and the degree to which these efforts pervade the organization.

As an observer, I attended meetings of the Audience Development Committee meetings with the goal of observing the leadership in action; I was looking for congruence between plans and actions. I analyzed a variety of administrative documents, including Board and Audience Development Committee minutes, CATCO’s mission statement, and its vision statement. I consulted recent audience figures as well. This research served to increase my understanding of previous and current audience development techniques, and to give me some clues about the success of the earlier attempts.

After I completed my key person interviews, I conducted four focus groups—one with current CATCO subscribers, one with former subscribers, one with non-subscribing single ticket buyers and another with non-attenders. These focus groups were designed to help me
develop a clearer perspective on what might be needed to develop CATCO's audience, with the information coming directly from the source (the audience members themselves.)

General surveys like the Greater Columbus Arts Council: Cultural and Arts Market Analysis Study (Stevens, 1998) (at the local level) and the National Endowment for the Arts' report: American Participation in Theater (AMS, 1996) (at the national level), can provide essential information, but neither source is specific enough to guide crucial audience development decisions of a single organization. Feedback from current and potential audiences is critical in creating an atmosphere and "product" that encourages participation and consumption. Focus groups can increase the accuracy of future survey questions, as well as improve the effectiveness of audience development techniques—especially marketing.

The triangulation of data sources (written records, staff, volunteers and audience), combined with the triangulation of methods (key informant interviews, focus groups, observation, and document analysis), increases the validity of the study. "Triangulation serves ...to clarify meaning by identifying different ways the phenomenon is being seen" (Stake, 1994, p. 240). An organization like the Contemporary American Theatre Company is composed of many interrelated people
and parts, so multiple perspectives are necessary to gain a thorough understanding of its needs and issues.

Of course, there is no one answer to CATCO’s audience development needs. Although this study was designed to study CATCO’s audience members as well as CATCO’s past and present work on audience development, there always remains the possibility of different approaches for CATCO’s future. Any changes must come from within the organization, and must conform to the CATCO mission as well as to any previously stated goals related to audience. It is my hope that this study will aid CATCO in its future decisions.

PROMOTION

Promotion is another important element of audience development. Boone and Kurtz (1999) define promotion as a “function of informing, persuading, and influencing the consumer’s decision” (p. 561). Theatres often utilize different means to promote their product.

Historically, subscription sales have been the backbone of support for most theatres, “providing a reliable source of much-needed revenue” (Building Audiences: Marketing, 1997, p. 9.). Subscription-based promotion became the standard in the theatres of the 1960’s; Danny Newman was an almost evangelical leader promoting his “Dynamic Subscription Promotion” and his efforts pushed subscription sales to the top of the priority list in audience development (Morison,
1993, p. 5). But while subscriptions are still the dominant model, today’s culture is not as conducive to subscription-buying as it was a generation ago.

Sometimes it takes creative packaging to appeal to different audiences.

As several participants in the Lila Wallace-Reader’s Digest Theater Initiative are learning, by coming up with inventive packages that offer better pricing and greater flexibility, the rewards are greater than just cash. Some of the newer kinds of subscriptions they’re trying are proving to be effective tools in broadening audiences and expanding the number and kinds of people involved in theater. *(Building Audiences: Marketing, 1997, p. 5)*

Some theatres have found a need to go even further and focus primarily on the single-ticket sale, the “problem” sale of past decades.

One current theory holds that “from the audience’s standpoint, there are more forms of expression to choose from than ever before” (Larson, 1997, p. 30). Thus, with a range of choices in both product and price, customers are demanding that theatres find ways to compete both in flexibility and cost. Affluent audience members are usually already attending the theatre via subscriptions (AMS, 1996, Robinson, 1993, Stevens, 1998), but if a broader audience is to be attracted, it must be reached in different ways. Increasingly, theatres are finding it difficult to convince audience members to buy a full subscription up front.
The decline in the popularity of subscriptions is due to a variety of reasons, but two of the most common are price and commitment. Subscriptions require a lot of money up front; in addition, many people might not want to pay for all of the shows because they don’t anticipate attending every show. “Commitment issues” refers to the unwillingness to be tied down to a particular night, seat, time, show or even theatre. Many of today’s consumers want the flexibility of being able to make spur-of-the-moment decisions.

Understanding how to best promote the company’s choices to the desired audience is an important part of the learning process for any organization hoping to increase or maintain its audience. The play may be the “product” that people come to see, but the first step is gaining the potential audience’s attention.

**PUBLICITY AND PUBLIC RELATIONS**

One way of attracting an audience is through appropriate use of public relations and publicity. According to Boone and Kurtz (1999), public relations “refers to a firm’s communications and relationships with its various publics” (p. 572). Publicity, as a part of public relations, is the “stimulation of demand for a good, service, place, idea, person, or organization by unpaid placement of commercially significant news or favorable media presentations” (p. 573). Publicity, of course, is one of the more difficult aspects of audience development to “control,” because
the media, advertisers, and other's decisions and priorities affect the kind of publicity a theatre may get. Most organizations seek to influence public relations by using their reputation and special events or stars to get their message to the consumer.

Building a good relationship with local media is crucial to developing an organization's reputation, but that alone will not get the job done. Unfortunately for CATCO, Columbus does not have a reputation as a significant arts town, nor is CATCO positioned in the Columbus audience's mind as an important player on the local arts scene (Stevens, 1998). This problem of "reputation" is certainly something CATCO needs to address in any discussion on audience development.

Special events are often used to increase the public visibility of an organization, but again, here a word of caution is in order. It has been found that special events are just that—"special." They do not result in an increase in long-term attendance or subscriptions. Many of the theatres investigated in the studies funded by the Lila-Wallace Fund found that, for reaching a particular segment of the population, one-time specials are insufficient. A commitment to preferred programming is necessary to attract a regular audience.
MARKETING

Marketing is another important aspect of audience development. To be successful, marketing approaches must be based on a detailed understanding of different audience segments, such as the public, staff, volunteers, government and funders. Ruth Rentschler (1998), in her article "Museum and Performing Arts Marketing: A Climate of Change," states that "different strategies are needed for different audiences" (p. 91). In her chronological classification, Rentschler identifies two major eras of nonprofit marketing—the Foundation period, ("characterized by recognition of the need for museums and performing arts organizations to change their approach to marketing") and the Professionalization period, (focused on the increasing use of arts marketing professionals for a variety of functions.) Rentschler also notes that a new era, the Rediscovery period, may be beginning. This period is shaped by relationship marketing as well as collaborative marketing.

In the course of this work, I will be examining several questions regarding CATCO’s marketing: What are they doing? Do they link marketing with audience development? What have they overlooked?

EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMMING

Educational programming can be used with the goal of audience development; the theory is that an educated audience will keep coming back. Certainly, a higher level of general education is a good indicator of
attendance at the arts. According to the study *American Participation in Theatre* (AMS, 1996), "Education remains the strongest demographic predictor of theater participation, [with] a college graduate ... twice as likely to attend a non-musical stage play as the average adult" (p. 17). This data refers only to a relationship between general education and attendance at the theatre; it does not address arts education *within* the theatre. But Bergonzi and Smith's report *Effects of Arts Education on Participation in the Arts* (1996), indicates a strong, positive correlation between arts education and arts participation. Arts education was found to be the strongest predictor of all types of arts participation except arts performance—even more reliable a predictor than general education.

While this fact may not prove that arts educational programming results in long-term audience retention, it is certainly an important factor. Educational programs such as school matinees or acting classes can bring students, teachers, volunteers, and parents into the theatre to see a show, increasing the audience for that show. This may spark a long-term interest, or perhaps it may just inspire someone to tell a neighbor about the production. It is easy to see how this kind of educational programming is related to publicity and public relations; theatres often seek extra media attention for events with children, and
the extra publicity is favored by businesses as well, thereby increasing public awareness as well as bringing in potential additional funding.

Educational programs are often a required component of public or private funding for the arts. Education can be as simple as detailed program notes or before show talks, which are sometimes essential for the audience to fully understand a piece. This aspect of arts education is discussed in The American Canvas.

Deborah Smith, director of the newly restored Opera House in Newberry, SC...agreed that the context in which art is presented in extremely important, both for challenging work ...as well as for any newer material with which a local audience might not be familiar. Armed with the proper background information with which to approach such work, she believed, an audience stands a better chance of viewing art on its own terms, meeting the artist halfway, as it were (1997 p. 71).

PROGRAMMING

Programming is the primary draw to a theatre. Attenders may be attracted because they are familiar with the show, or have seen good reviews, or they may prefer a particular genre. On the flip side, some theatres have found that certain types of shows will keep audiences away. Although any theatre should and must retain artistic freedom regarding show selection, it is best to keep in mind the tastes and opinions of one's audience. Leonard (1990) says

it remains...an artistic obligation for the artistic staff to gain a growing knowledge of its public in order to plan appropriate, accessible, and artistically viable productions. Success in such work is measured by an increased comprehension and
understanding of the audience, not simply increased ticket sales. (p. 92)

Understanding the audience increases the accuracy of attendance predictions, which in turn helps in accurately making budget predictions, thus increasing the stability of the organization as a whole. However, Leonard cautions against “administrative...needs...gaining dictatorship over artistic choices” (p. 93); he stresses instead knowledge, communication and responsibility.

Audience awareness is especially important when undertaking programmatic changes. Such changes may be part of an overall audience development plan, or reflect a new artistic direction, but whatever drives them, it is important not to lose sight of the needs of long-term audience members; if changes are too drastic or audience education is not included in the plan, the result could prove disastrous.

TECHNOLOGY

While most of the factors that affect audience development that I have listed so far were those identified by Morison and Dalgleish (1993), there remain many more that I have not considered. New technology is one area that warrants discussion. According to E. Andrew Taylor (1995), author of “Rethinking the Performing Arts for the Media Age,” the most successful arts administrators will be those who take full advantage of the abilities of new technology. With regard to the Internet
and the World Wide Web, this could be as simple as finding the sites that attract the target audiences and "position[ing] their organization's activities in a way that is engaging and welcoming to [that audience]" (Taylor, 1995, p. 218). This also involves increasing the organization's links with other sites. It is a safe bet that such strategies will be of increasing importance in the future.

**CONCLUSION**

It is easy to see that serious audience development is an enormously complex undertaking, one that touches on all aspects of a theatre and includes a multiplicity of components. Such efforts cannot be done without full support from within a theatre company. The success or failure of an audience development attempt is critical to the future of any organization. I have studied CATCO as one example of this process, hoping to see where its ideas and strategies fit into conventional wisdom, while hazarding guesses about CATCO's potential for success.

This study differs from typical audience studies in that it looks closely at a combination of the theatre, the audience and particularly the non-attenders. The theatre's attitude and practices usually determines the path the organization takes to audience development. However, it is the audience and the non-audience that need to determine that path. Within the mission and the goals of the
organization, the audience and the potential audience must be served or the theatre will be unable to continue.

I have chosen to study CATCO to see how a theatre combines its stated goals and beliefs with actual practices and how that effort is interpreted by the public. If there is an appreciable difference, that is significant because it indicates a gap in theatre professionals knowledge about the audience that must be remedied to be successful. If there is no gap between theory and practice or between efforts and perception, then wherein lies the problem? CATCO’s subscriptions are, while mostly steady for the past few years, still down from the high point. CATCO’s single ticket sales are down. What is happening here?

Chapter 2 contains a review of related literature, while Chapter 3 describes the methodology and the methods I employed to gather the data. In Chapter 4, I report the results of my data collection; Chapter 5 provides a conclusion, an analysis—and recommendations for the future.
CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

INTRODUCTION

"In the search for audience, ultimately every theater finds its own way."
—Building Audiences, Marketing

The search for successful audience development techniques is a perpetual concern for those who are involved in arts management. Audience membership is in constant flux: people move away, their interests or financial situations change, they find themselves at a different stage in their family life cycle. Any of these personal and family changes can affect the level of attendance at and participation in many art forms—including theatre. Given a theatre’s continuing need for information about the audience, then, it is reasonable to expect to find ample research on this topic.

A major portion of such literature has focused on developing an understanding of current and former arts audiences. These studies investigate and categorize audience data, then theorize about patterns of arts participation. Most such studies are quantitative in nature; that
is, they focus on numerical data (e.g. the number of women attending a specific theatre performance). Although some “barriers to attendance” are discussed in the literature, the questions are superficial, and seldom allow for in-depth or personal responses. Data is presented in aggregate, and tells the story of the particular group of respondents; it does not closely investigate individual interests or inclinations.

Some of the existing studies are more interested in telling a story about a theatre; for example: what did a particular theatre do that appears to have been successful? Such studies are primarily qualitative in nature, lacking the hard data found in the quantitative studies. Yet they are richer in detail, sometimes providing a more thorough understanding of the reasons behind the choices that audience members make.

The third body of literature I will explore is more explanatory in nature—the kind that offers suggestions about what future actions a theatre might take to build its audience. Most of these are generalist texts, by which I mean they are dealing with multiple, interrelated topics. Thus, audience development is usually only addressed in a small portion of these works.

**CURRENT ATTENDERS**

First, I will discuss the Surveys of Public Participation in the Arts (SPPA), because they are referenced in many other studies, either as
support for the ensuing data or as justification for the research. These surveys (conducted in 1982, 1985, 1992 and 1997) were sponsored by the National Endowment for the Arts. The first three studies were conducted by the U.S. Bureau of the Census as part of a larger national survey, while the 1997 survey was done as an independent survey.

Since the figures from the 1997 study were released fairly recently, there have not yet been published efforts to analyze this data. Most of the extant analyses, then, are somewhat dated, yet they still may be useful in helping to understand major trends. Several such reports have analyzed participation across a variety of arts disciplines using the 1983, 1985, and 1992 data; most of these are focused on one or more independent variable such as age, race, or socio-economic factors. Some focus on an individual art discipline, such as theatre, rather than on a particular audience characteristic.

Jack P. Robinson’s (1993) Arts Participation in America: 1982-1992 is a general summary of the data from the first three SPPA surveys, analyzing audience changes over a period of a decade. He discusses responses to questions about attendance at live arts performances, examines audience participation through broadcast and recorded media and looks at individual participation and general attitudes toward the arts. Regarding attendance at live performances, Robinson noted a “non-significant increase of 1.6 percentage points for
plays [that was] offset by a decrease of 1.2 percentage points for musicals” (p. ii). It will be interesting to see the new analyses of the 1997 data. However, due to certain changes in the information gathering techniques used in the 1997 survey, as well as in the questions asked in the newer survey, some of its data may not be directly comparable to the earlier statistics.

Another important source of information about theatre audiences is the Theatre Communications Group’s (TGC) annual survey of its members. While primarily a fiscal survey, this questionnaire also includes some important audience participation data. According to TCG, “Overall, theatres have been producing more performances, and more people have attended their productions, with the growth in number of performances outpacing the growth in attendance” (Voss et al., 1998, p. 10). Although increased attendance is a positive sign, theatres must be wary of becoming overextended by the high creative and financial costs of “the labor-intensiveness of the art form (p. 5). Additionally, most of the increase in attendance is related to touring programs; audiences at resident shows have actually remained relatively stable since 1996-97, with a statistically insignificant drop in the three-year period 1995-1997.

This resonates with the previous TCG study that covered a five-year period but included fewer theatres. “Careful study of the figures
suggests that, despite ups and downs, the audience for these 68 theatres has remained essentially stable over the last five years” (Samuels, 1997, p. 28). While the selection of theatres to be included in the survey is not entirely random (being limited to Theatre Communications Group members), this survey does provide a snapshot of current trends in American theatre. It is particularly relevant to my study because CATCO is a Theatre Communications Group member. Voss’ and Samuel’s reports concur with that of the SPPA, noting no significant changes in recent audience attendance. Given these reports, it appears that American theatres are facing a period of stable audience numbers. Within this landscape, audience development might provide different challenges than it would in an era of growth or rapid expansion.

The available studies, though quite helpful, are in themselves, insufficient to answer the questions I wish to pose. I want to know what creates and limits theatre attendance. I am interested in analyzing the opinions of theatre professionals, but I especially want to know the audience’s perspective. It is important to “take the pulse” of the audience by talking with individual patrons. I have chosen to focus on one theatre to allow this kind of depth, and to make meaningful comparison between groups within my study. Since audience opinion is rarely portrayed in the current literature, I believe my study adds to the
field by providing a glimpse into the minds, and the hearts, of an audience.

ATTENDANCE ANALYSIS

Many researchers have used the SPPA data to discuss certain independent audience variables such as age, race and gender—variables that might affect audience participation in the arts. For example, DiMaggio and Ostrower (Pankratz & Morris, 1990) discuss race in “Participation in the Arts by Black and White Americans.” They attempt to compare “the behavior and tastes of blacks and whites with respect to several kinds of consumption and avocational production of traditionally Euro-American and historically black art forms” (p. 105). This study used historical data to set the stage and then took secondary data from the 1982 SPPA to analyze racial patterns in arts participation, while offering potential explanations for those patterns. Many other studies have examined the racial disparities found in the fine arts in general; these studies should be essential reading for theatres hoping to expand their audiences, but such research cannot cover all of the variables that affect attendance.

In Age and Arts Participation with a Focus on the Baby Boom Cohort, Erin V. Lehman (1996) edits a volume that looks at arts participation with respect to age. Lehman uses data from both the 1982 and the 1992 SPPA surveys to analyze participation according to
“cohorts” ("a group of individuals born at roughly the same time and thereby sharing a variety of sociohistorical experiences") (p. 1). The report suggests that, factoring out other variables such as education, income, and family life cycle, "baby boomers" and successive generations are participating in the core art forms—jazz, classical music, opera, plays, musicals, ballet, art museums, and literature reading—at significantly lower rates than their predecessors. Although the core art forms do not represent all of the arts in America, they are a commonly agreed-upon benchmark for measuring participation over time. "This report [strongly] suggests that something should be done to ensure future audiences for the benchmark art disciplines, the backbone of traditional American culture" (Lehman, 1996, p. 5). My case study and analysis might be just one of the steps in that process, since an understanding of the audience is crucial to ensuring future participation.

Lehman's use of cohorts allows us to anticipate changes in participation over time, by comparing earlier data from the same cohorts and predicting future audiences. This is essential for accurate planning. As Lehman (1996) herself says:

The active support of the arts by audiences makes a difference to the vitality of American culture and its future. Artists, arts administrators, policy makers, funders, and all those who care about the arts should pay close attention to the changing age composition of audiences in America, because it provides not only
a snapshot of the present demand for various art forms but also in the years to come (p. 7).

For example, if the participation of the "early boomers" cohort (those born between 1946 and 1955), is compared to the participation of the "World War II" cohort (born between 1936 and 1945) over time, (say, in the SPPA surveys of 1982 and 1992), then significant and relevant conclusions might be drawn about audience trends in theatre. If, at both points, the boomers had lower rates of participation, then one might safely project that the trend would continue. The ability to confidently predict trends in participation might increase a given theatre’s ability to plan its programs and budget accurately.

It is interesting to note that, using the same SPPA data, Robinson and Voss both claim there is no significant change in theatre participation in recent years, yet Lehman noted that when holding the other variables steady, audience participation in the seven core areas—including theatre—has actually decreased. Neither analysis is optimistic, yet each has slightly different implications for audience development.

In addition to Voss, Robinson, and Lehman, there are several NEA reports that use the SPPA data to focus on a particular discipline. J. Mark Davidson Schuster’s (1991) work, *The Audience for American Art Museums*, is interesting because it not only discusses participation rates and profiles of audiences, but it also analyzes "unsatisfied demand
and barriers to attendance" (italics mine). I believe that while it is important to know who is attending our theatres, it is just as important to know who is not. How do you attract new audiences? Creating solutions to people's "barriers to attendance," and seeking to meet their "unsatisfied demands," might be one approach.

*American Participation in Theater* (AMS Planning and Research Corp., 1996) does not provide much detail about non-attenders, but it does give us a starting point by providing an excellent breakdown of the American theatre audience. It covers multiple independent variables such as education, income, age, race/ethnicity, gender, marital status, residency, region, and the presence of children in the home. According to this report, theatre participation rates in the Midwest, at 14.4 percent, are actually slightly higher than the national mean of 13.5 percent. This, at least, is encouraging news.

One fact that particularly interested me in *American Participation in Theater* was the effect children have on parental theatre attendance. In the 1992 data, families with small children—under the age of 6—have a very low rate of participation (between 7 and 10 percent depending on the number of children), as well as low attendance frequency rates (1.3-1.8 annually); this compares to 13.8 percent participation and 2.5 frequency of attendance for audience members with no children. While such statistics are certainly not surprising, the
theatre manager who is aware of details like these can implement creative strategies to help his or her parental audience to grow.

A review of literature in the field reveals that some reports don't make use of the SPPA data. Rolf Meyersohn (1990), for example, studied "Culture in the Bronx: Minority Participation in the Arts." His method was "a series of questions," posed to Bronx residents (p. 142), designed to parallel the 1982 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts, thus allowing a comparison to the national sample. The Bronx was chosen precisely because that borough is usually not associated with the arts, and was "therefore particularly interesting to be able to determine how extensively its residents participate in the arts" (p. 142). Bronx residents were not seen as culturally active in the core areas identified by the SPPA, yet they proved to be active in other ways, leading Meyersohn to conclude that "this disjunction between perspectives illuminates the difficulty of drawing conclusions about cultural participation" (p. 148). American Canvas agrees, calling the SPPA "a useful index of Americans' behavior in certain formal areas of the nonprofit arts, but far from a complete inventory of arts participation" (Larson, 1997, p. 42). Thus the SPPA alone may be insufficient for capturing the actual level of arts participation in the United States.

Audience studies such as that of the SPPA are not new. The National Endowment for the Arts' Research Division Report #9 is titled
Audience Studies of the Performing Arts and Museums: A Critical Review (DiMaggio, Useem, & Brown, 1978). This report discusses many of the same factors that are analyzed in greater detail in the reports listed above—including basic demographics, the changing arts audience over time, predictions of quality and utility of audience surveys, and examinations of the potential impact of such studies. In the section titled “Agenda For Arts Audience Research,” the authors recommend the “routine gathering of descriptive statistics about the audience over time” (DiMaggio, 1978, p. 72). This need has been addressed partially by the 1982, 1985, and 1992 SPPAs, but there is one recurring theme: “Many people in the arts have stressed a need to expand audiences to include those not already reached” (DiMaggio et. al. p. 73).

All these studies share a common theme; each seeks to gather quantifiable data and use it to understand the arts audience. However, as Lehman (1996) notes, “Those organizations that wish to build their audience must understand its composition and the reasons why it attends events. Equally important, they must understand their ‘non-audience’ and the reasons for non-attendance” (p. 8). The quantitative studies assist with understanding the composition of current and former audiences; some, such as The Audience for American Art Museums, briefly discuss the reasons behind attendance or the lack thereof (J. Mark Davidson Schuster, 1991). But to go deeper into the
psyche of the audience, and to speculate meaningfully about the non-
audience, requires more intense, personal investigation of the kind I am
conducting here.

WHY DO PEOPLE ATTEND?

Some of the recent studies that relate to audience development
were done with the intent of gaining an understanding of the reasons
people attend the theatre or other arts. This will also be the focus of my
work. People can believe that theatre is a “good thing” for the
community, and perhaps even believe they ought to attend
performances. But many still don’t attend. Why? What keeps them at
home? What moves them to choose other outlets for their entertainment
dollar? What gets people into the theatre?

First we must realize that it takes an effort—sometimes small,
sometimes big—to attend live theatre. Some audience members must
get a babysitter; others need to arrange transportation to the theatre.
Once they get there, will they like what they see? Will the whole
experience—including driving, parking, paying, entering, watching,
intermission and so on—be a satisfying one for them? What details
make them want to return—or not?

Although a few of the studies that were mentioned earlier do
indeed examine barriers to attendance, most don’t incorporate
individual responses. The majority of the existing research relies on
surveys that offer a set of pre-determined possible answers; respondents must choose the answer closest to their own opinion. In contrast, I am interested in asking real people direct, open-ended questions about why they choose to attend (or not attend) the theatre.

Louise Stevens' (1997) study, The Greater Columbus Arts Council: Cultural and Arts Market Analysis Study, takes some steps in this direction. Stevens' was a general arts survey of the Columbus community, with two stated goals: (1) "to serve as a tool for Columbus arts and cultural organizations to maintain and strengthen relationships with current attendees and supporters" and (2) "to win new attendees, members, subscribers, and donors" (p. 118). She asked questions related to all the major cultural organizations in Columbus, delving into audience opinion about the arts in general, and the arts in Columbus specifically, as well as looking at several specific organizations.

The average respondent did not consider Columbus an "arts town." However, Stevens' research actually shows that Columbus ranks favorably as an arts center when compared with other major cities in Ohio. Comparing the consumer purchase potential indexes of Columbus and other Ohio cities, with 100 as average, Columbus scored 108 in the "Attends Live Theater/Concert/Dance" section. This compares to 103 for Springfield/Dayton, 103 for Cincinnati, 93 for...
Canton, and 106 for Cleveland (Stevens, 1997, p. 60). In other words, even though Columbus struggles with its "Cowtown" reputation, it already ranks as the most active arts market in Ohio, within the fields of theatre, concerts, and dance. Columbus arts professionals should use this statistic to combat the idea that if you want "real" arts, music, dance, or theatre, you must travel to Cleveland or Cincinnati to get it. Furthermore, this statistic should prove suggestive for arts organizations in Columbus—CATCO included. One immediate priority could be improving Columbus' image; such success in public relations could have residual effects throughout the arts community here.

As intriguing as the Stevens' study is, it provides insufficient hard data for an organization that must make changes. Each individual arts organization needs to understand itself, its audience and its potential, then apply all the relevant research to its own unique situation. Once this has been done, and the audience itself is consulted, then an audience development plan can help achieve the organization's stated goals, thereby "ensuring future audiences."

One good starting point might be a series of in-depth looks at theatres, such as that sponsored by the Lila-Wallace Fund, using multiple organizations to understand different topics. These topics include marketing, programming and diversifying audiences. According to *Building Audiences: What Theaters are Learning about the Role of*
Marketing (1997), “the way resident theaters go about diversifying their audiences is quite different from the marketing strategies used by community-based theaters to expand their current base of patrons” (p. 3). Community theatres are usually, by definition, focused on a particular community. Some mid-sized theatres, on the other hand, face issues that are similar to those of resident theatres, with a strong need “to present themselves as welcoming places that are sincerely interested in serving newcomers from a mix of backgrounds. While doing so, they also need to sustain strong relationships with their traditional clientele” (p. 3).

PROBLEM SOLVING LITERATURE

A significant body of literature deals with solutions to the problems commonly faced by arts organizations. While there is no single work that deals specifically with audience development, there is quite a selection covering audience concerns with related issues. Most of these take a prescriptive stance: “Do this, and all will be well.” I include Kotler and Scheff's (1997) Standing Room Only in this category; it contains a wealth of information on marketing the performing arts. The authors provide comprehensive information on many aspects of managing the performing arts (including audience development) in an easy-to-read, example-laden format that clearly illustrates the points in the text.
Morison and Dalgleish’s (1993) *Waiting in the Wings* is subtitled “A Larger Audience for the Arts and How to Develop It.” The authors discuss the history of audience development—which formerly was focused only on subscribers—as well as the current emphasis on aggressive marketing to sell both subscriptions and single tickets. Finally, they turn to speculation on future trends in audience development. Morison and Dalgleish believe “audience development is the long-term process of encouraging and assisting an audience member to become increasingly more involved in the life of an arts institution” (p. 79).

They developed a strategy they call “SELL—Strategy to Encourage Lifelong Learning” (p. 80). The key to this approach is a willingness to nurture relationships over time; theirs is not a scheme designed for quick results. As I have discussed, special events aimed at increasing the audience for a given show do not usually result in long-term audience retention or growth. SELL is based on gradually encouraging deeper levels of participation, thereby slowly increasing commitment to the organization. In particular, Morison and Dalgleish advocate abandoning the conventional belief that subscriptions are the best way to increase an audience. Single ticket buyers, they say, are more likely to become new members, because they are entering the market with a
small, comfortable step. With time and quality performances, people can be encouraged beyond that first step.

*Waiting in the Wings* is radical because it actually argues *against* subscriptions, the theatres traditional means of enticing new customers by giving them a discount for buying a full season or package. Even a reinvented package is still a subscription they say, and Morison and Dalgleish make a cogent argument that it is time for theatres to find a better way.

Alvin H. Reiss (1995) wrote *Don’t Just Applaud, Send Money!*, a collection of success stories from arts organization around the country. Each chapter covers a different topic relating to funding and marketing the arts, and contains multiple scenarios that showcase how one arts organization succeeded in its goals. For example, Chapter 3, “Audience Reach,” highlights the American Repertory Theatre in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where the theatre provided babysitting to encourage parents to attend shows. Reiss’ book is chock-full of ideas; most theatres could find something helpful here, but his lack of detailed descriptions could hinder successful implementation of these good ideas.

Another NEA (1995) publication, *A Practical Guide to Arts Participation Research*, provides a plan for conducting arts participation research similar to that done in the Surveys of Public Participation in
the Arts. Its strength is that it discusses the reasoning behind the research, planning and implementation of participation research. A Practical Guide offers a good blueprint for anyone considering arts participation research which it says is “separate and complementary to audience research” (p. i). Arts participation has a broader context, says the NEA, focused on patterns of participation across many variables.

Turning to a book specifically about theatre, Steven Langley’s (1990) Theatre Management and Production in America is a dense work that covers everything from the first idea for starting a theatre through choosing managers, location and staff. It compares commercial, nonprofit, stock, dinner, college and community theatre as well as theatrical presenting organizations. The final section discusses “the theatre and its audience” (p. xix). This book attempts to be the definitive source for information on managing theatres; I would recommend it as such.

Beyond traditional arts literature, there is an immense amount of information to choose from. There are student texts such as Contemporary Marketing 1999, by Boone and Kurtz (1999), as well as literally shelves of business books available at any library or bookstore. Many texts can be useful references, sparking ideas or changes in an arts organization. Again, however, studies in which audience members have a distinctive voice are few and far between.
I believe that a deeper study into one audience is useful—both for arts managers, and audiences themselves. Such a study would not, of course, be definitive; after all, according to Professor Mary K. Marvel (1998) of The Ohio State University, “it takes multiple studies to finally bring the weight of the evidence.” More intensive research would be needed to give a clearer picture of audience composition, trends and desires, suggesting solutions to the ongoing challenge of audience development. There already exists aggregate data on audiences that could be combined with more qualitative, intensely focused research such as mine to show a more complete picture of theatre audiences today.

The following chapter will explain why a case study was the methodology I chose to study CATCO’s audience development. It also will offer details on the specific methods chosen to collect my data, such as interviews, focus groups, observation and analysis of written documents. Site and participant selection also will be covered in Chapter 3.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

"There are limitations to any approach to the study of the world."
—Barone and Eisner

INTRODUCTION

This study was designed to help us understand some of the reasons people attend the theatre and some of the reasons they don't. Theatre, among the performing arts, is especially vulnerable in its relationship with its audience.

In an art form that only exists in that moment when the audience/participants and the artist/practitioners are actively partnered in a shared imagination during the performance, exactly who those audience/participants are is a crucial factor in shaping each specific expression of the form. (Leonard, 1990, p. 90).

To understand the theatre audience—who they are, who they are not and the reasoning behind their entertainment choices—I felt a qualitative study was essential. This involved talking directly with participants, both in the process of making and observing theatre. Although surveys can be one form of qualitative data, and can ask
questions about reasons and intent, they are limited in their scope. They may not allow time or space for additional, unexpected or spontaneous answers to surface.

General data on arts audiences already exists across the United States and in Columbus, Ohio, from of the Survey of Public Participation in the Arts (SPPA) on the national level and the Columbus Arts Marketing Study on the local level. The SPPA data already has been analyzed to give some information and theories on theatre audiences; these data and theories can be compared to the Columbus survey data.

I decided to utilize the existing data, then delve deeper into the audience of the largest theatre company in Columbus which fit my parameter of a mid-sized (budget between $1-3 million) theatre. This was Contemporary American Theatre Company (CATCO). CATCO has been cooperative in providing access to the materials and people I need for my study.

**CASE STUDY**

"Case study" is a general term that is used by different academic fields in slightly different ways. "In its broadest application, ‘case study’ refers to research that focuses on a single case or single issue, in contrast with studies that seek generalizations through comparative analysis or compilation of a large number of instances" (Reinharz, 1992,
This study will explore CATCO’s relationship with its audience, focusing on why that audience chooses to attend or stay away.

A single case study has many limitations; one of the most significant is its lack of generalizability. Donmoyer (1990) says the traditional concern with generalizability revolves around the question, “how does in-depth knowledge of a single case help us to understand and act more intelligently in other potentially different cases?” (p. 184). Tom Barone and Elliot Eisner (1997) discuss the matter of generalizability as it relates to arts-based research.

Matters of generalizability are fundamental in the conduct of science. Scientific work is not concerned with that cat, but with cats. Case studies, which are almost always the focus of artistically based inquiry, address particular circumstances and do not necessarily represent the features of any particular population. And even if they do, it would not be possible under the approach described in this chapter to know if they do. Thus, matters of replicability, validity, and generalization—three pillars upon which social science research rest—are at best shaky in so-called artistically based research, or they don’t exist at all. (p. 84).

Barone and Eisner (1997) go on to admit that “having recognized some aspect of, say, teaching or schooling through the vivid portrayal of an individual circumstance, a reader is in the position to locate similar features in other situations when they exist” (p. 86). Here they raise the concept of transferability, the ability of a reader, any reader, to take information from one study and use it in another setting. This leaves
usefulness decisions in the hands of the readers, not the author or the academic community.

"Because different 'lenses' or perspectives result from the use of different methods, often more than one method may be used within a project so the researcher can gain a more holistic view of the setting. Two or more qualitative methods may be used sequentially or simultaneously" (Morse, 1994, p. 224). The methods that I used to collect data during this case study were key informant interviews, focus groups, observation and written documents. These multiple techniques allowed for a "more holistic view" through triangulation of data within the case study, thus, it is to be hoped, increasing the validity of my overall study. Furthermore, within each of these methods, I used "data triangulation: the use of a variety of data sources in a study" (Janesick, 1994, p. 214). I interviewed multiple leaders within the CATCO organization; I developed focus groups composed of different types of attendees. I also analyzed a considerable amount of documentation, and sat in as an observer in multiple meetings within the organization I was studying.

**INTERVIEWS**

I began by interviewing key CATCO staff and volunteers. These included Geoff Nelson, Artistic Director; Nancy Fox Chrstos, Education Director; Rick Hole, Business Manager; and Tim Miller, as Chair of the
Audience Development Committee. I chose these individuals because of the nature of their jobs; they are the leadership within CATCO and what they do impacts directly on CATCO’s audience development policies.

I undertook the interviews with a basic assumption: “With qualitative interviewing, the goal is to develop an understanding of the social and psychological processes that have occurred in a particular setting, or among people who have had particular sets of experiences” (Jones, 1996, p. 140). By focusing on the CATCO leadership, I explored the attitudes toward audiences and audience development of those in decision-making positions. I used these interviews to gain a sense of CATCO’s audience development strategy.

“Questions and answers, of course, are the defining characteristics of that most sociable of all research tools, the interview” (Jones, 1996, p. 139). The list of questions I used is located in Appendix A. I started with a set list of very general questions, and added a few targeted questions based on the particular role of the CATCO respondent and the answers to the original questions. My intent was to ask open-ended questions, “those to which the respondent can and will respond as he or she wishes [with] the freedom of the respondent to volunteer whatever information he or she deems most appropriate in response” (Jones, 1996, p. 145). I felt it was important to give the respondents latitude in order to allow their opinions to surface, within
the constraints of the interview setting. While some fear that open
ended questions actually inhibit deeper answers, according to Jones
(1996) the fear that open ended questions can generate superficial—
rather than thoughtful—answers has been generally disproven by
research by J.G. Geer. Throughout, I attempted to obtain answers that
were as honest and individual as possible.

Each interview was recorded on audio tape and immediately
transcribed. When quoting from an interview, I will reference the
transcription. “There is a strong consensus that tape recording and
transcribing are essential” (Jones, 1996, p. 148). This assures accuracy
and prevents distraction during the interview, while providing obvious
analytic benefits as well. “Analysis proceeds with careful readings of the
transcripts and the development of a set of theoretical concepts to
account for what the transcripts contain” (Jones, 1996, p. 171). As a
member check, I provided the interviewees with a copy of the
transcribed interview before using their responses in my thesis. CATCO
had the right to prevent any material from being used.

DOCUMENTED EVIDENCE

Another important step in my research was an analysis of written
records. I reviewed CATCO’s written documents to help shed light on
the company’s approach to audience development—how that concept
fits into the current organizational and long-term strategic plan. I began
by reading the mission statement, because everything done within an arts organization should connect to the mission. Next, I reviewed the vision statement to see how the vision of CATCO's future matches its mission. I examined Board minutes (1996-present) and the Development Committee minutes (inception-present) to understand the role of leadership in audience development.

I examined their audience survey data from marketing research done in 1996, along with recent attendance figures. I looked at their marketing and public relations records to see what written declarations of audience development strategies existed, and with an eye toward analyzing whether or not existing marketing, audience development or public relations plans had any appreciable effect.

I read CATCO educational programming brochures and program descriptions to understand the company's educational goals. I also looked at several examples of program notes, since I believe the educational aspect of the arts is important, given the data in the literature on links between arts education and arts participation.

**OBSERVATION**

After reviewing the minutes from several Audience Development Committee meetings, I attended some myself. I used this opportunity to watch the various members of the committee, and see the group in action. I wanted to understand the role of leadership in developing
audience: What do they say and what do they do? Although the minutes of previous meetings had given me a general feel for the Board’s commitment to audience development, my observation of this committee gave me another level of understanding. It is important to note that I was strictly an observer, not a participant-observer, at the request of CATCO.

**FOCUS GROUPS**

After collecting the data from interviews and documents, I turned my attention to the primary focus of my study—CATCO audience members. I wanted to understand what makes them want (or not want) to attend the theatre. After reviewing the literature on focus groups, I chose to use four focus groups, in order to gather the information from a wide variety of people, while maintaining homogeneity within groups with regard to attendance patterns.

According to Morgan (1997), focus group design often follows a few “rules of thumb;” focus groups:

a) Use homogenous strangers as participants  
b) Rely on a relatively structured interview with high moderator involvement  
c) Have 6 to 10 participants per group  
d) Have a total of three to five groups per project (p. 34)

It is important to remember that while Morgan’s suggestions may reflect typical focus group research, they are not hard-and-fast rules; focus
groups can fit all or some of these criteria and still produce a quality study.

I sought to follow these guidelines in my CATCO audience focus groups. The four groups were composed of strangers who were homogenous across the variable that I was studying—theatre participation. The groups were divided as follows: (1) CATCO subscribers, (2) former CATCO subscribers, (3) CATCO single ticket buyers and (4) non-attenders. I wanted a representative sample from each category of attendees that I was investigating. Although I ran some risks in increased variability within the groups (Morgan, 1992), I felt that it was essential for the groups be separated due to generate informative group discussions. Although different individuals within any given group may have different personal reasons for making similar decisions, I did not see this as a disadvantage, because this is precisely the type of information I was interested in.

CATCO provided mailing lists divided into the categories I requested—subscribers, single-ticket buyers, former subscribers and non-attenders. To allow me to generalize within each group, I randomly selected 100 names in each category and mailed these 100 people an invitation to the focus group. Potential participants were invited to return a postage-paid response card that was included with the invitation. My initial approach was only by mail; at CATCO's request I
chose not to use the telephone to solicit participants. However, on the response card I did ask for phone numbers so that I could confirm an individual’s anticipated attendance, and make a reminder phone call a few days prior to the focus group. I also wanted this option in the unlikely event I received a response rate over 10%. A sample approach letter and response card are in Appendix C.

I sought a group size of six to eight group members because I agree that “below six, it may be difficult to sustain a discussion” and above eight, “it may be difficult to control one” (Morgan, 1997, p. 43). However, I found it difficult to control the size of the focus groups, because some who agreed to attend a given group in fact did not end up doing so. The subscriber focus group ended up with nine people while the single-ticket buyer group had only four. Nonetheless both groups shared opinions and information candidly and comfortable. (The single-ticket buyer focus group, with only four members, actually sustained its discussion better than did the larger subscriber group.)

With the subscriber group, in fact, I had too many people agree to participate, and I had to turn down some of the respondents in order to keep the focus group at optimal size. On the other hand, with the former subscribers and non-attenders, I did not receive sufficient interest with my first 100 mailings, so I randomly selected 30 more names from each group and mailed another round of invitations. That
mailing provided sufficient response for the former subscriber group for a group size of four, but I had to postpone the non-attender group until a later date when not enough interested parties could attend the originally scheduled date. Eventually, I mailed an additional 175 invitations to achieve a final non-attender group size of seven.

The first three focus groups met during the evening, between 6 and 8 p.m. I scheduled the meetings for two hours to allow an uninterrupted 90 minutes of actual discussion, with allowances at either end of the time for late arrivals and early departures, plus a break in the middle. The final focus group—the non-attenders—met on a Saturday morning, between 10 a.m. and 12 noon. The particular times and dates may have been awkward or difficult for some audience members (and, in fact, prevented some from attending), but the schedule was dictated by CATCO’s logistical needs.

I was the moderator of each focus group; my intention was to elicit the participants’ articulated reasons for theatre attendance (or non-attendance). I structured my questions (see Appendix B) to maximize the focus of the discussion on this goal. Morgan (1997) calls this level of moderator involvement a “more structured group” (p. 39). For me, the advantage of meeting my specific research needs outweighed the disadvantage of any constraints on the participants’
freedom (Morgan, 1997). The focus groups were nonetheless more open than a survey might have been.

The focus group sessions were audio taped and transcribed to provide a written record of the proceedings. Since focus groups are a form of group interview, Jones (1996) is relevant: “There is a strong consensus that tape recording and transcribing are essential” (p. 148). I decided against videotape to minimize distraction and anxiety for the groups. Again, I provided transcripts of the focus group meetings to CATCO, giving the leadership there an opportunity to see the results before using the material in my thesis. This provided a basic level member check for the process. Although the focus group attendees themselves did not verify the transcripts, anonymity ensured the participants could not be damaged by any statements they had made. Additionally, the focus group members consented to my use of the information in my thesis. When referring to focus group data, the page numbers will reference the transcriptions.

**CONCLUSION**

The goal of this study is to understand theatre attendance, and I felt a review of all of the material listed here was essential to that goal. As I stated earlier, I have used data triangulation of both methods and sources to give the clearest possible picture of audience development as it relates to one specific theatre company, CATCO. I wanted a thorough
understanding of the process from the institution's point of view before investigating its audience's opinions. The multiple focus groups served as snapshots of different parts of that audience, hopefully providing a representative sample of audience members. Concentrating particular types of attendees into different groups allowed for significant, in-depth discussion of the topic. As I move into Chapter 4, reporting the data I collected, I hope the picture of CATCO's audience development comes into focus.
CHAPTER 4

RESEARCH RESULTS

“What can we do to make you want to come to the theatre?”
—Nancy Fox Chrstos

“I don’t participate in any of the cultural things in town. I always kick myself for not [doing so], but I still don’t do it. And I don’t know why.”
—Former Subscriber

INTRODUCTION

Since theatre is one of the performing arts—created within the moment of performance—to fulfill its purpose, it requires an audience at that moment of creation. A theatre must have an audience to create its art. As Geoff Nelson, Artistic Director of CATCO, says, “You can’t perform without someone who observes the performance. Well, you can, but it’s called rehearsal” (p. 2). In the long term, a theatre must have an audience to continue to exist. Nancy Fox Chrstos, Education Director of CATCO, says, “At the risk of sounding trite, a theatre is not going to survive without an audience” (p. 5).

Therefore, one of the major objectives of any theatre is to develop and maintain its audience. Creation and presentation of a production—
no matter how high the quality—does not ensure an audience. So what can a theatre do to ensure an audience for its production?

This is the question upon which this thesis is based. By studying CATCO, I have looked, in depth, at how one theatre has handled audience development. Although other research has examined audience development, those studies have tended to confine themselves to interviews with the theatre or the audience. In talking with both the theatre's leadership and its audience, I was able to examine the issue from both sides of the curtain, thus gaining a deeper understanding of the factors at work in audience development, while providing the beginning of an interactive dialogue for CATCO itself.

Just how does CATCO develop and maintain its audience? I asked four leaders from the staff and board to answer this question. The answers, while distinctively unique, do contain some common themes, perhaps pointing to an organizational vision.

**GEOFF NELSON, ARTISTIC DIRECTOR**

As the Artistic Director, Geoff Nelson sets the overall tone for the theatre. Although he does not regularly use the terminology “audience development,” he says he is acutely aware of the importance of the audience to CATCO’s success and he expresses that sentiment to other staff and volunteers. Nelson indicates that CATCO utilizes multiple techniques to reach out, inform and invite people to attend—including
marketing, publicity, direct mail, education and programming.

"Everything we do is designed to hopefully, attract people to come in" (p. 3). CATCO's mission is to provide theatre for a diverse audience. Programming is designed to be diverse, to appeal to that audience. The theatre depends on marketing and publicity to gain a potential customer's attention, but once a patron attends a show, Nelson hopes that it is the quality of the performance that brings him or her back.

Nelson says he is aware that CATCO's current audience development strategies are insufficient, however, and cites falling numbers of single ticket buyers. The company is working on building their audience through specific actions. These include hiring a new marketing director, developing a marketing plan, incorporating some parts of audience development into its strategic plan, increasing education efforts for next season, and regularly surveying its audience to determine attitudes and opinions. Furthermore, CATCO is developing a brochure with information and maps of downtown Columbus, hoping to encourage more people to attend the theatre by making it easy.

TIM MILLER, AUDIENCE DEVELOPMENT CHAIR

Tim Miller, Board Member and Chair of the Audience Development Committee, cautions that audience development is a vague concept, but he defines it as "two things: It's attracting people to put them in the seats, but ...[the other] basic function is...making your
brand name known” (p. 1). Making the consumer aware of CATCO is perhaps the first of many steps that leads that person into the seat.

Miller says he is convinced that CATCO’s name is confusing to people, and thus negatively impacts audience interest. Miller says the name has been regularly discussed during his board tenure. According to Miller, the problems with the name are that it does not immediately convey who CATCO is and what it does nor does the name contain the word Columbus. Miller says, “We claim we want to be this arts player in Columbus yet we’re the only major arts organization that doesn’t have the word Columbus in its name” (p. 7).

Miller divides the audience into two groups, “the addicted” and everyone else. He believes that any theatre, CATCO included, must focus on “everyone else” in order to grow. People who love theatre will return because “they’re getting a life experience” (p. 4); Miller says these people are delighted with the high quality of CATCO’s productions and could barely imagine a life without theatre. But the other segment of the population— the one which often determines profitability—is looking for entertainment and needs to be wooed and pleased. For these people, quality may be important, but it is not the primary attraction. According to Miller, this entertainment aspect is often overlooked or ignored by theatre professionals, but “unless you approach it that way, you may be destined to fail with that [audience] group” (p. 4).
The Audience Development Committee, Miller says, should serve as an advisory panel for the marketing director, generating ideas and providing counsel. Unfortunately, for some time, this committee has had to act as a “de facto” marketing director, with less than optimal results. Thus, Miller is excited that CATCO has hired a new marketing director, and sees it as an important step forward for CATCO. Miller hopes that the efforts of the Audience Development Committee have made a long term impact, but he isn't sure. He would prefer better tracking of attendance patterns and more extensive use of existing audience data.

**RICK HOLE, BUSINESS MANAGER**

Rick Hole, Business Manager of CATCO, broadly defines audience development as “all of the activities which help to bring more people to the theatre” (p. 1). Hole notes the importance of audience development in a competitive economy. “There’s a lot going on, and if you’re not there actively developing your audience, they’re going to go other places” (p. 1).

Hole believes that CATCO always has recognized audience development as “something very important” (p. 2). He indicates the company’s commitment to having an Audience Development Committee, as well as targeted education efforts and task forces.
However, he also notes that sometimes resources are not available to support audience-building efforts.

Like both Nelson and Miller, Hole cites the consistent quality of performances as “our major effort to keep subscribers coming back” (p. 2). He regularly interviews people who do not renew, and says that, while a few complain about quality or play selection, most refer to things beyond CATCO’s control such as illness, moving or time constraints.

While Hole includes the traditional methods of audience development such as direct mail and promotions, he feels that “word-of-mouth is the best way to attract new audience members” (p. 3). Word-of-mouth can be mobilized by encouraging board members, subscribers and volunteers, “people who you hope feel strong ties to what you’re doing” (p. 4), to get the word out to friends and acquaintances. The CATCO staff does regularly ask what prompted a person to attend a particular show, and, according to Hole, the typical person says he attends CATCO because of one of three things. “I got a mailing from you. I heard about it from a friend. I saw something in the Dispatch” (p. 4).

When commenting on barriers to attendance, Hole mentions “lack of knowledge” as the primary culprit. He believes that CATCO needs to communicate effectively so potential audience members learn about
CATCO as a viable, easy, interesting and affordable entertainment option. This is especially important when competing against larger organizations with bigger budgets. Hole thinks that CATCO should spend more on advertising, but admits that could take away money from the productions. After all, getting the audience’s attention is only half the battle; it is the quality of productions that keeps people coming back.

**NANCY FOX CHRISTOS, EDUCATION DIRECTOR**

Nancy Fox Chrstos, Education Director of CATCO, emphasizes the importance of the audience for a theatre’s survival. “We have such a tremendous amount of competition that CATCO is not going to survive unless we develop an audience” (p. 5). CATCO is currently using outside consultants to help work on a plan to distinguish the theatre from the competition and “really engage people” (p. 6). However, Fox Chrstos firmly believes that the quality of productions is what draws people initially, and is what will keep them returning for future plays.

Fox Chrstos also sees education as an important aspect of audience development. Her concept of education goes beyond acting classes and program notes: “It’s building a connection to CATCO and encouraging people to get involved in ways that interest them” (p. 1). Marketing and public relations are two more components of the “relationships that you are building” (p. 2), she says.
Developing audience relationships is a long-term investment, she says, and one that might not directly relate to a specific organization. For example, Fox Chrstos does not believe that the education program should be exclusively about audience development for CATCO. She sees her "role as more supporting the arts than supporting specifically CATCO" and she feels that she is audience building. "But if they end up going to the museum...that's just as great. We are trying to make them aware of the cultural opportunities, and how they can grow as an individual by connecting to the arts" (p. 4).

Another concern of Fox Chrstos' is audience identification of CATCO and its offerings. She says "too many people confuse us with CAPA" (p. 9), because both present theatrical productions and the names are similar; when she attempts to explain the difference by saying CATCO is a "resident theatre" (p. 9), most people don't understand the distinction. According to Fox Chrstos, two of CATCO's biggest obstacles are having people understand "who we are and having people understand where we are" (p. 9).

Part of the solution, she believes, lies in increased educational activities for all ages—some designed to increase actual attendance and others aimed at increasing familiarity and comfort with the theatre. Again, Fox Chrstos is quick to point out that audience education is a slow process, and the results are difficult to measure. Although she
does attempt to track the number of people affected by her programs, it is unclear what precisely educational programs accomplish with regard to audience development.

AUDIENCE SEGMENTATION

Tim Miller, Audience Development Committee Chair, believes that subscribers and repeat single ticket buyers are “getting something out of theatre that has nothing to do with entertainment. They’re getting a life experience... But you have another part of your audience buying and selling their entertainment, and this is just one part of the options” (p. 4). According to Miller, non-regular single ticket buyers “typically tend to be the segment that will make you profitable or not profitable,” so it is just as essential to cater to this group’s “entertainment” needs as it is to satisfy your long-time subscribers.

CATCO’s audience can be segmented in a variety of ways such as by gender or zip code or age. When I chose to study CATCO’s audience, I separated my focus groups by attendance patterns. Within those groups, I was looking for similarities and differences in the reasoning behind attendance or non-attendance, to see if there were distinct patterns that could be understood and utilized by CATCO. Between the groups, I also was looking for differences that could explain why a particular individual was in one group and not another, and I was
looking for similarities that might provide the clues to help CATCO increase its attendance.

**SUBSCRIBERS**

Nine people attended the subscriber focus group—four males and five females. The attendees ranged in age from 43-73 years old. Most had adult children, while 3 had teenagers at home. All had attended at least some college, with five holding a graduate or professional degree. On a self-rated scale, most said they had participated in either little or no arts education as a child or an adult. A majority also subscribed to other arts organizations in and around Columbus, including OSU Theatre, BalletMet, OperaColumbus, Otterbein Theatre, Columbus Children’s Theatre, and Polaris Amphitheatre.

This well-educated group of subscribers chooses to attend because of the quality productions, the intimate of the theatre space, excellent customer service, and the variety of plays. These subscribers like to support “theatre” and “the arts,” and are proud of having CATCO in Columbus. “I feel that if it weren’t for the arts, there would be something bigger in my life that would be missing,” said one subscriber tearfully (p. 2). None found fault with CATCO’s level of service, even when pushed.

This group prefers subscribing because of the value, and because it encourages them to attend shows they would otherwise skip for one
reason or another. They are busy people who schedule other events around CATCO when possible, and they are pleased with the ease of exchanging tickets when scheduling conflicts arise. All have rescheduled at one time or another; one man even said he chose a subscription night based on the best schedule for his family, but planned to exchange tickets even before he received them in the mail.

These subscribers are generally supportive of CATCO’s move to the Riffe Center, but they indicate a dislike for the chairs in Studio One and the “sterile” atmosphere of the building. It is important to these subscribers that they get their seat; they feel a sense of belonging by telling the usher, “We know where our seats are” (p. 8). The small, intimate theatre space is a draw for most of the subscribers; some even complained about larger theatres such as the Palace Theatre, where they felt the seats were too far from the stage and the value was considerably lower than at CATCO. Everyone in this focus group indicated they plan to continue to subscribe; one couple even plans to add their daughter.

**FORMER SUBSCRIBERS**

Four people attended the former subscriber focus group, three males and one female. Their ages ranged from 44-54. One man had three adult children; the others had no children. Two had undergraduate degrees; one had some college. One man and the woman
had participated in a little to a moderate amount of arts education. The other two men said they had not participated in any arts education in any setting. All of them participated in other arts activities around Columbus including the Columbus Arts Festival, BalletMet and Polaris Amphitheatre.

Like the current subscribers, the former subscribers said they appreciated the value of the productions at CATCO. One man had subscribed primarily because of the cost, as compared to that of the Broadway Series; he enjoys theatre, but was concerned by the expense of the higher-ticket series.

For these people, one very important benefit from subscribing was the motivation to attend. "I thought that if I subscribed, it would force me to go," said one person (p. 2). Being a subscriber, most agreed, ensured their attendance at most, if not all, of the shows during the season(s) they subscribed.

This group has also discovered that the reverse is true as well. All believed—when they did not re-subscribe—that they would attend one or more shows this year. However, at the time of the focus group—when each was given two passes for any production during the remainder of the season as a "thank you" for participating—none had actually attended a performance. Again, these are busy, over-committed people who have difficulty finding time for the theatre. When they were

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subscribers, they felt that, having already paid their money, they should go; now, without a subscription, they were not making the time to attend.

The group members stated several reasons why they did not re-subscribe. One did not enjoy the productions because they failed to entrance him or “remove [him] from reality” (p. 6). Another had experienced ongoing ticket problems, and miscommunications with CATCO staff and felt subscribing was not worth the hassle. What these people had in common was that they had never developed what Tim Miller might call “brand name” loyalty to CATCO. Each had chosen to subscribe believing he or she would get a good value on entertainment. Although they were satisfied overall with the theatre experience, they were not “thrilled” and so decided to seek their entertainment elsewhere.

SINGLE TICKET BUYERS

Four people attended the single ticket buyer focus group, two males and two females. The age span was 34-69 years. Both women had four grown children each, while neither of the men had children. All had attended at least some college, with one graduate or professional degree among them. Both men had experienced little or no arts education, while both women indicated they had participated in at least a moderate amount.
The people in this focus group are active in the Columbus arts scene, attending Ohio State theatre, Otterbein Theatre, Columbus Symphony Orchestra, Polaris Amphitheatre, Columbus Children's Theatre, Picnic with the Pops, and the occasional Broadway Series performance. Regardless of the venue, they all prefer buying single tickets instead of subscribing.

These single ticket buyers say they attend CATCO because of the high quality, intimacy, and easy accessibility. One stated that the combination of quality and price makes CATCO a good value. They appreciate the physical space of the theatre and the convenience of the downtown venue. They like how close the seating is to the stage, and they enjoy knowing where to park as well as the ease of parking at the Riffe Center. For one woman, parking was an important consideration because she did not feel safe walking by herself around downtown at night.

These people choose to attend particular shows that interest them. In contrast to the former subscribers, they have attended shows this season; they choose not to subscribe because of underlying issues related to the season as a whole. For one, it was offensive language in some productions; for another, a desire for greater variety than one theatre can provide was the determining factor. Two indicated that the mix of plays did not appeal to them. This focus group prized the
freedom to pick and choose from an assortment of entertainment events.

**NON-ATTENDERS**

Seven people attended the non-attender focus group, one male and six females. The ages of the participants ranged from 28-64. Three had no children; three had adult children, and one had teenagers at home. All had attended at least some college, with four holding undergraduate degrees and two graduate or professional degrees.

These CATCO non-attenders reported many of the typical reasons for not choosing to attend the theatre. Time and money were their immediate responses, but more pervasive was the feeling that CATCO does not produce the “type” of shows that they would prefer to see. Most said they don’t pay attention to CATCO’s promotional efforts because they are predisposed against them. Only two members of the group preferred more unusual fare. These were the two youngest people (both in their twenties) who attended any of the focus groups. They said they did not attend due to lack of information or lack of awareness of the productions.

The people at this focus group admitted they attend arts events almost strictly for entertainment. All of them indicated a need for more information before making a decision on whether or not to attend a particular production. They were unwilling to “invest” the time to attend
a CATCO production to find out if they would like it or not. They wanted an “entertainment satisfaction guarantee.”

**SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES**

I have detailed each of the CATCO interviews and audience focus groups separately for the sake of clarity. To understand the subtleties of the situation and to provide meaningful strategies for future action, however, I will now combine the data within each element of audience production as defined earlier. These include the elements listed by Morison and Dalgleish, publicity and public relations, communication, and educational programs. I also include programming and technology which I specifically investigated as well as the element of quality which emerged from the research.

**QUALITY**

Quality is the foundation of CATCO’s attraction, both to new and to returning audience members. All of the CATCO interviews and focus groups mentioned quality as crucial to a positive theatre experience. Nancy Fox Chrstos believes it is “the quality of product that they see on stage” that attracts and retains audience members (p. 6-7). According to Dr. Roger Blackwell, marketing professor at The Ohio State University, “If consumers are happy, they will tell three of their friends; if unhappy, they will tell eleven friends” (1998, Sept. 28, Class Lecture). If
Blackwell’s assertion is applicable to arts organizations, then maintaining production quality is a necessity for CATCO while a decline in even perceived quality could be disastrous. CATCO is facing a decline in single ticket sales, so attention to quality is crucial to improve word-of-mouth, as well as to persuade occasional attenders to come more frequently.

Loyal subscribers are likely to be active recruiters for CATCO. But, as one subscriber put it, “If we see a really good play, we make it a point to tell our friends, ‘Go down and see this.’ If we see one that is mediocre ... we just don’t tell them anything” (p. 9). Such comments should be heartening CATCO’s leadership. Regular single ticket buyers also said they encourage their friends to attend—with varying degrees of success. Since many single ticket buyers wish to attend with these friends, they have not seen a given show prior to attending it. They tend to focus on CATCO’s overall reputation of quality rather than on one specific production.

Other comments from the focus groups also support the centrality of quality to CATCO’s efforts. When asked, “What...draws you to CATCO?” the very first answer in the subscriber focus group was, “The quality of the productions” (p. 1). A single ticket buyer also mentioned the “good quality production[s], professional production[s]” (p. 1).
All agree quality is crucial. Without a quality product, even the best marketing will not increase long-term audience retention. With quality as a building block, however, then the other aspects of CATCO’s audience development plan can be addressed.

**PROGRAMMING**

Programming—the choice of plays—affects audience attendance decisions. In CATCO’s audience strategy, programming is a fairly conscious consideration. CATCO intentionally provides a wide variety of plays, including comedies, dramas and musicals, as well as older plays and new productions. “Because we are aimed at a diverse audience, our programming is diverse to try and reach that audience” says Nelson (p. 1).

CATCO’s emphasis on varied programming does not go unrecognized by its audience. One subscriber noted “the variety of plays” as a reason for subscribing (p. 1). Another commented that she “wouldn’t probably have the variety to go to if [she] weren’t a subscriber” (p. 3). Even people who had not attended any shows appreciate variety: “I think you need to have a variety to meet the audience that you’re trying to serve (Non-attender, p. 12). However, even CATCO cannot provide enough variety to satisfy everyone. Several single ticket buyers want the freedom and variety of the entire Columbus arts scene.
CATCO also has a reputation for providing more "contemporary" and "off-the-wall" fare. To some extent this reputation dates to the inception of the organization, when CATCO was created to fill a gap in Columbus theatre choices. Founder Geoffrey Nelson felt that a contemporary, American theatre alternative was missing in Columbus; he believed an audience could be found for such shows. And it was.

Sometimes this reputation works to CATCO's benefit. "I enjoyed CATCO because of the not-so-traditional theatre" said one former subscriber (p. 2). Another man enjoyed that "[CATCO] was so different than anything that I had seen before" (Former Subscriber, p. 1). A woman said, "I think one of the original draws for us was that CATCO did a lot of cutting-edge—or what we considered cutting-edge" theatre (Subscriber, p. 14).

However, other participants in the focus groups actually saw this reputation as a negative. "I don't want to have these far-out things. That's sort of the impression I get from the shows that CATCO puts on" said one out-spoken non-attender (p. 2). Others, again seeking entertainment, felt some CATCO productions were not to their taste. "If I'm going to the theatre, I don't think I want to be challenged, and obviously, I don't want to be offended" (Single Ticket Buyer, p. 5). "Entertainment is the main pull [to the theatre]" said another non-attender (p. 2).
Thus, it is possible to speculate that CATCO’s focus on diversity in its offerings may negatively affect audience development, because some single ticket buyers and non-attenders (the groups that can make your attendance grow) seem turned off by unfamiliar or challenging works. CATCO is in competition with several other arts presenters in the Columbus market, some of which don’t have this particular problem. “The Broadway Series, for instance, can trade on name recognition...for its major pieces in a season” (Nelson, p. 4). This makes CATCO’s job more difficult.

Clearly, no magic formula exists that can appeal to everyone; the trick is to attract as many people as possible. For CATCO, the immediate goal is to attract more people than currently attend, and although its subscription base is solid, single ticket sales have decreased in recent years. When attendance figures do not meet expectations, budgets are negatively impacted. This may focus staff and board attention on solving an immediate problem, perhaps resulting in less time and energy to devote to the underlying issues of long-term audience attraction and retention.

**MARKETING**

Producing a high quality, diverse season of offerings is not sufficient, however, to increase theatre audiences. A company needs to make intentional, specific efforts aimed at attracting and retaining the
attention of potential audience members. Marketing is a primary component of those efforts.

CATCO’s leadership already understands the importance of marketing. Fox Chrstos says marketing is “probably the most aggressive means, [the most] direct means for building your audience base” (p. 1). To Nelson, marketing is “the way in which we sell our product and inform people about what we have to offer” (p. 1). CATCO’s “marketing budgets have always been very limited” (Hole, p. 2), but it is currently developing a strategic plan that includes marketing. A new marketing director has also recently been hired. These actions suggest that CATCO is preparing to increase marketing efforts in the future.

In the focus groups, few individuals remembered seeing any significant CATCO marketing. The subscribers were sympathetic, citing the obviously expensive costs of print and television ads, but the non-attendees wanted much more information through the media. They suggested almost continuous exposure, in print, on television, on radio, and in the mail, to provide them with sufficient information on which to base an attendance choice. “I think that if something is in front of you all the time, it clicks. If it’s just periodically, it doesn’t click as much,” said one non-attender (p. 9). Another non-attender acknowledged that “there are a lot of markets going after [people’s] dollars, and it’s very hard to make you stand out among the other ones” (p. 8).
CATCO, as a mid-sized theatre, does not have the financial resources of some of its competitors. And while most of its audience seems pleased with its size and intimacy, many do say they would like more out of CATCO, whether it is more advertising, more extensive marketing, or more information. As one former subscriber put it, "It's kind of a contradiction. How do you get someone's attention without giving a large production and still keep your smallness?" (p. 12).

PUBLICITY, PUBLIC RELATIONS AND PROMOTIONS

Publicity—which includes reviews—is defined by Nelson as "things that we generate for the media or for print or broadcast," while public relations is "every single contact we have with anybody anywhere" (p. 1). Contact with the public, of course, is an important part of encouraging people to attend the theatre. Simple theatre reviews and feature stories, whether in newspapers or on television may not reach as many people as one might think. "The only reviews that I read thoroughly are for shows that I am definitely going to, or that I have already been to," said one non-attender, summing up a common theme (p. 11). Many subscribers wanted easier access to reviews, but they are the people who are already attending shows. Across the board, focus group comments did not indicate that reviews are helpful in attracting new people, but they are important for informing and satisfying the current audience.
Even the Columbus Arts Festival appears to reach primarily those persons who are already interested in theatre. A former subscriber first became aware of CATCO at the Arts Festival, but several of the non-attenders admitted they avoid the CATCO tent when possible, and throw away any promotional material they are handed. Still, the effort can be valuable, as the former subscriber described above indicates.

**EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS**

"Theoretically, if you have a good educational program ... you would broaden your exposure to the community," says Miller (p. 3). Ideally, arts education serves to educate and build future audiences while at the same time attracting and retaining the interest of current audiences. According to Miller, CATCO has not been able to adequately measure the effects of its educational programs, admittedly a difficult undertaking since there is no direct, quantifiable cause-and-effect relationship and since education is inherently a long-term, ongoing process.

Fox Chrstos, does, however, attempt to track attendance by students through the High Five program (a city-wide program in which students can attend events at participating arts organizations for only $5), as well as through student matinees and internships. She also receives a number of "testimonials" from students who have been
affected by CATCO in various ways. In part, these testimonials help “to show the value of the program” (Fox Chrstos, p. 5).

CATCO is working on several new programs aimed at families for next season, hoping to encourage parents and children to explore the theatre environment in a fun, low-commitment way. The idea is that early exposure for the children, community with other parents with similar interests, and improved awareness of CATCO’s offerings will aid in building a relationship between the theatre and the families. In part, these are promotional events, but they are also educational initiatives.

The literature provides mixed opinions on whether or not arts education causes increases in arts participation. (American Canvas, Bergonzi & Smith). However, educational programs certainly can improve the public image of an organization, spur short-term audience increases, and may even work toward long-term audience development. So, arts education remains an important part of audience development.

TECHNOLOGY

Many focus group attendees were very interested in being able to access information about CATCO on-line. One non-attender suggested using the theatre’s existing web site to post extensive information about upcoming shows including story lines and whether “adult content” is included. Another would like to receive e-mail about individual shows. This woman did not want be required to “think or go into this web site
any time I am looking. [An e-mail would appear] if there is information that I need to know” (Non-attender, p. 14). One former subscriber wanted regular e-mails sent to him to let him know when single tickets were still available for a performance. Again, he was willing to expend only minimal personal effort to find out what he needed to know.

This desire for the most information with the least effort echoes throughout the focus groups. It emerged in comments such as “It doesn’t grab me, even though I know it’s about this fine show” (Non-attender, p. 3). Even the subscribers, who were more interested in reviews of the shows, wanted the opportunity to read the reviews online at their leisure.

**SUBSCRIPTIONS**

It is particularly noteworthy that, throughout the focus groups, several people indicated that a theatre interested in their attendance should find a way to get to get them to subscribe. Subscribers said this. Former subscribers buyers said this. Even non-attenders said this. As one former subscriber remarked, “I thought that if I subscribed, it would force me to go. And it certainly did. And that’s something that I needed” (p. 2). Another former subscriber commented that his wife told him, “if you buy the tickets, you’ll go, and if you don’t buy them, you won’t” (p. 2). He backed that up by noting that, this season, as non-
subscribers, they have attended no shows, even after agreeing to attend the shows that interested them.

One female former subscriber had the interesting opinion that it's "a guy thing, the need to buy a season pass" (p. 2). However, I found the need to buy a season subscription across all attendance patterns, genders and ages. Even with the busy schedules that most of the attendees said they had, they were virtually unanimous in saying that, if they are going to go to the theatre, they want, and in some cases, need a season subscription to make it possible to plan their other activities around the theatre.

Morison and Dalgleish (1993) describe a process they call "Sell Now! Subscribe Later!" These authors believe that "audience development is the long-term process of encouraging and assisting an audience member to become increasingly more involved in the life of an arts institution" (p. 79). In other words, they see subscribing as part of a process in which audience members are encouraged to gradually increase their level of involvement, slowly building connections between the theatre and the audience, leading ultimately to a subscription and a donation.

CONCLUSION

On first glance, there appear to be certain appreciable differences between the four audience member focus groups consulted in this
study. However, there are also many points of agreement. The CATCO leadership is already aware of many of the stated focus group concerns; in fact some of the information contained here simply confirms their suspicions. Other focus group responses offer new insights. Hopefully, my analysis can be beneficial for CATCO, and for other similar theatres, by providing a distinct way of looking at audience development—as a partnership between the theatre and the audience. This approach—sometimes called relationship marketing in the business world—calls for long-term thinking and planning. A relationship is only built over time, and with trust.

To develop and maintain its audience, CATCO uses the aspects of audience development as defined by Morison and Dalgleish—promotion, publicity, marketing, public relations, communications, and educational programming. In addition to those, the organization is aware that programming, technology, and a reputation of quality are also ways of building an audience. While some of these strategies are used more intentionally than others are, CATCO's leadership is aware that how these factors are managed can affect the ability of the theatre to draw in larger audiences.

CATCO has been aware of some of this information for a long time. Audience surveys from 1991, 1994, and 1998 emphasize many of the same points; quality, value, intimacy and friendliness were
important then and are still important now. However, the knowledge has not translated into increasing audiences. There is still a gap between awareness and action.

With the variety of arts offerings available in Columbus today, it is difficult for CATCO to carve out a distinct niche in the market. “There are so many theatres. If you wanted to go to something, you could probably pick a different company every night and never run out of plays to see,” said one former subscriber (p. 15). Even people who are interested in the arts don’t always attend. There are other things to do; there are conflicts with family and work. It will require a lot of work on CATCO’s part to gain the attention and participation of new audience members, but the effort could prove well worth it.

Chapter 5 contains some audience development suggestions specific to CATCO as well as some recommendations for future research. However, I hope these ideas will prove useful not only to CATCO, but also to other theatres involved in the challenging process of audience development. Sharing ideas, successes and failures is one way to increase effective use of resources while building audiences. When more people attend the theatre, everybody wins.

CATCO is rarely short on good ideas. It has acquired long lists of possible activities from many surveys, questionnaires, consultants and staff. However, it is still experiencing difficulties in gaining and keeping
more audience members. Perhaps a slightly new perspective, a look at non-attenders and a view of audience development as a partnership with the audience might encourage CATCO to act.
CHAPTER 5

RECOMMENDATIONS

“Well, if we have a show, they’ll come, won’t they?”
—Tim Miller

INTRODUCTION

Audience development is an ongoing process. Geoff Nelson says, “Obviously, if a theatre is to have a future, there has to be planning, in terms of who the audience will be for that theatre down the line, not just at the immediate juncture in time” (p. 2). CATCO is actively engaged in the audience development process, aware that its audience is an important support system for the company.

In looking at the issue of audience development in mid-sized theatres, I was interested both in understanding how a real theatre might, in the midst of its necessary day-to-day operations, approach audience development, and in understanding what effect that approach might have on its audience. I was particularly interested in audience response. What motivates people to attend (or not attend) the theatre? To investigate the underlying assumptions and reasons that affect audience attendance, I posed several questions within my research:
• How does CATCO develop and maintain its audience?
• Does CATCO use promotion, publicity, marketing, public relations, communications and educational programs, as defined by Morison and Dalgleish?
• Is programming a conscious consideration in attracting and keeping audience?
• Is CATCO doing anything that can benefit other theatres?
• What are other theatres doing that could benefit CATCO?
• What motivates current and potential audience members?
• From the perspective of the audience, what choices could CATCO make to increase attendance?

These questions were designed to research how CATCO organizationally approaches audience development; to examine the situation from the perspective of the audience; and to bring the two views together in the hope that helpful conclusions could be drawn that might apply to CATCO and similar theatres.

**RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CATCO**

The focus groups provided just a glimpse of audience opinions, a mere snapshot lacking the breadth of an audience wide survey. But my focus groups allowed for exploration into several individual perspectives on CATCO and its audience development efforts. The people were open and willing to share; they were opinionated about what CATCO could do to serve them better, and in the process, increase attendance at its productions.

Theatres are responsible for collecting data on their own audience, of course, and accurate decision-making cannot occur without that information. However, CATCO does not have a well-
developed system of data collection in place. Although the staff does ask occasional questions of some audience members, this remains an area CATCO needs to improve. Effective collecting, recording and analysis of data from the audience is crucial to understanding the audience's unmet needs, and thus the future opportunities for the theatre. Such groundwork provides the information needed to accurately target audiences with what they need to be able to make a decision.

As part of its audience development repertoire, CATCO must seek to understand what prompts a person's decision to attend the theatre. Currently, CATCO asks most ticket buyers how or where they heard about the show. Some ticket buyers are able to share this information, but often they don't remember. Perhaps CATCO could glean this information more effectively with a 2-for-1 or $5 off coupon that ticket buyers would have to physically redeem, thus providing accurate data on what specific marketing actually impelled the ticket purchase.

Targeting information to particular audience segments could also be an effective tool, but it requires a thorough understanding and awareness of the different potential audiences. Such efforts can require additional up-front expenditures, but this could be money well-spent. Until recently, CATCO's staffing has been inadequate for its audience development needs. The addition of a marketing director will allow the company to more intentionally attract and track its audience, and
bodes well for CATCO's long term commitment to audience development.

CATCO has extensive surveys from the past that could be collated to give a view of how audience priorities are changing over the years. Currently, yet another survey is being done that could be combined with both this study and other surveys. CATCO is not lacking information. Now is the time to act.

EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMMING

CATCO is working with the next generation of theatre attendees through an extensive internship program, participation in the High Five program, school tours and programs, educational material sent to local teachers, and encouraging class field trips to the theatre. These are not new ideas, of course, but they are essential in creating a fertile atmosphere for long-term theatre participation. Fox Chrostos believes education is extremely important in building an audience base. Acting classes are popular and frequently filled; plans are being hatched for expanding classes to introduce families to the theatre.

However, even with the expansive educational programming, this is another area where more could always be done. Few of the focus group participants, for example, had any idea that CATCO offered classes. After an open discussion about the possible real-world applications of acting classes, such as in one's business setting, many
were intrigued by the concept and wanted more information, indicating
the possibility of filling additional classes if that is what CATCO wants.

Because its educational programs are thriving, CATCO might look
at them as an excellent place to increase recruitment efforts, and to
address the "brand name" recognition issue. Theoretically, people who
attend these classes are predisposed to theatre, would welcome
additional information and could develop a particular loyalty to CATC
as a unique theatre on the Columbus scene.

TECHNOLOGY

A common theme emerged from all the focus groups regarding the
use of modern technology: increase CATCO's presence on the Internet
and World Wide Web. Time and again, focus group members expressed
interest in learning about entertainment options through e-mail and
Internet technology, and expressed frustration at the amount of
information about CATCO that was electronically available to them.
CATCO's current web site consists of a single page featuring only titles
and dates of the shows, and basic contact information. Today's
technological savvy theatre-goer wants more.

One crucial component of Web presence is links from other sites.
To increase "traffic" on CATCO's site, it needs to be linked with other
sites that might interest the same person who needs to know more
about the theatre or the shows. Other cities have arts and
entertainment links from their city government and chamber of commerce web sites. This is something to consider here.

Focus group attendees suggested regular communication from CATCO via e-mail as a reasonable and desirable way to receive information regarding shows, availability of seats, discount offers, subscription information, reviews, and so on. One obvious advantage to CATCO, in addition to customer satisfaction, would be an enormous savings on postage, especially if e-mail could be the primary method of communication for some patrons, eliminating the need for regular postage. This certainly appears to be the trend of the future, at any rate.

Of course, CATCO—like many non-profit organizations—is struggling to update its patchwork computer system. Although prices are falling, technology remains a major investment. It is difficult to keep pace with consumer expectations regarding technology, but more and more, a strong Internet and Web presence is changing from a luxury to a necessity. This is one area in which CATCO could consult other theatres to learn about what they are doing, perhaps even jointly exploring innovative possibilities.

One simpler—and cheaper—technological change is as close as the phone book. “CATCO” is not listed in the Columbus white pages; the company’s listing is for “Contemporary American Theatre Company.” If
a person can't remember (or doesn't know) precisely what the “C” stands for, (many might think it is “Columbus,” for example) then it becomes difficult to find CATCO in the phone book. This has even happened to subscribers: “I could not think of what CATCO stood for. I just went blank,” said one (p. 16). The recommendation here is simple: add an additional entry in the phone book under “CATCO.”

Technological changes are suggested to make information-gathering as easy as possible for potential audience members. The focus group attendees were clear that they want to exert only minimal effort on to learn about theatre and other entertainment options. Whether it is something as simple as the phone book, or as complex as the Internet, CATCO has yet to address its technological opportunities fully.

**SUBSCRIPTIONS**

Subscriptions are the backbone of audience development. Although some sources suggest that today’s busy, over-committed theatre-goer doesn’t attend very often and doesn’t want to subscribe—a situation I found in my research as well—it does seem that subscriptions are a way for theatre supporters to prioritize theatre attendance. Without the inducement of “money already spent” and dates already marked on the calendar, many focus group attendees, even theatre lovers, found time passing without attending any shows. Additionally, the series subscription encouraged them to take chances
and see a play they had never heard of, or one that didn’t sound particularly appealing. Ironically, the very things that make subscriptions difficult to sell to non-attenders, are precisely what attracts subscribers.

But it is important, in any long term audience development strategy, to remember that most subscribers begin as single ticket buyers. The goal is to move audience members through deeper and deeper commitment to the theatre. Perhaps offering new ways to subscribe might prove popular. One commonly mentioned approach would be emphasizing and expanding the FlexTix program, in which customers can buy a book of 8 passes and essentially create their own subscription series. They can choose to bring friends and use all of the passes on one show, or use one pass for each show.

If an entire subscription is not financially possible for some people, perhaps spending half that for a sub-set of a season’s plays might be a choice. Other possibilities might be a two-for-one ticket deal in which the two tickets were not for the same show, in which the customer buys one for this show and gets a ticket for the following show.

There was a sentiment among the focus group members that attendance at a single show is insufficient to stimulate a long-term relationship. Still, getting someone into the theatre for the first time is
an important hurdle, because of such factors as unfamiliarity with the
ticket process, the physical aspects of the theatre, parking, and so on. It
is on subsequent attendance, however, that familiarity, confidence and
commitment begin to be developed.

The goal then, is to gradually build a relationship with an
audience member. This could be done in many ways. For example, to
encourage single ticket buyers to attend shows they think they might
not enjoy, CATCO might invite them to volunteer as an usher for a
night. They see the play for free, and develop an appreciation for the
finer points of the production. The theatre could also offer “satisfaction
guaranteed” promotions from time to time.

CATCO also has an excellent opportunity in its FlexTix program
to showcase its willingness to work with the consumer on a desirable
ticket package. The non-attender focus group, for example, was
unaware of the existence of such a program, and expressed interest in
learning more about it. Some of them seemed to be leaning toward
FlexTix subscribing, based on its flexibility and savings. If anyone did
buy a FlexTix subscription, they could gain first-hand knowledge about
CATCO quality and value over time, perhaps leading to a continuing
relationship.
OTHER OPPORTUNITIES

The annual Columbus Arts Festival remains a wonderful opportunity to reach a large, arts-friendly audience. However, focus group complaints such as "it's [just] literature" indicate that written material is not what people are looking for in the arts festival setting (Non-attender, p. 15). People say they are there to see the art, so perhaps a more effective approach would be to offer some of the art the theatre creates. It would be possible to give snippets of live performance in the CATCO booth at the Arts Festival. Such a "teaser" could grab people's attention, then stop at a crucial point, encouraging them to attend the show to find out how it all ends. At that point, perhaps some literature, including price inducements, might be favorably received.

CATCO is already aware of the importance of word-of-mouth. For example, in one focus group, a former subscriber related how he had convinced a cab driver of the wealth of cultural opportunities in Columbus by asking if the driver had ever participated in specific events. The driver was forced to admit that perhaps there were opportunities he had not taken advantage of. CATCO's goal must be to encourage this kind of attitude in its audience, perhaps with a "bring a friend" night. CATCO has attempted similar things in the past; it appears that the time is ripe to try again.
IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FIELD

What does this research mean for theatres other than CATCO, theatres that are also working on audience development? To begin with, other theatres might find ideas within CATCO's approach that could inspire their own leadership and staff. CATCO, too, could look to other theatres that have been profiled in the literature for information to undergird their own plans.

For example, CATCO currently is producing a brochure to better inform audience members about the accessibility of CATCO in its new venue, the downtown Riffe Center. However, similar brochures has created problems for other organizations. Emily Franzosa (1999) describes a situation in which a local post office declared a non-profit's mailing to contain "inappropriate commercial content," and charged the organization the full first-class postage rate on what was a very large bulk mailing (p. 6). The "inappropriate content" was a map of the organization's neighborhood that was included as a service to their community. As a result, the mailing was delayed and the organization was charged for a violation of the non-profit mailing rate. CATCO and similar theatres can only benefit from increased awareness of others' problems.

Theatres can, and should, if properly networked, be able to learn from each other's mistakes. In an effort to serve its diverse
constituency, for example, CATCO expanded its season to 10 shows last year. However, this overextended the entire organization, and many of those involved felt that insufficient resources could to be devoted to each show. As a result, CATCO has decided to produce 7 plays next season, in order to give each show the attention it deserves, and, in the process, seek to maintain its “quality” emphasis.

This willingness to cut back also has proven popular with the audience. Some focus group members said they were overwhelmed by the number of shows this season. They cited the extra cost, difficulty in keeping track of productions, and even overlapping shows. Most of the attendees prefer a shorter CATCO season so they can fit CATCO in with their other arts and entertainment choices.

The data on audience opinions on subscriptions is surprising. Traditional theory is that those who want the subscription and can afford it, already purchase one (AMS, 1996, Robinson, 1993, Stevens, 1998). Morison and Dalgleish (1993) advocate slowly building people up to a subscription. This data suggests that slowly might be too slow. If a person has excellent experiences the first few times he or she attends, then that would appear to be an excellent time to pursue a modified form of subscription such as a book of passes, or a half-season subscription.
Sharing experiences, both good and bad, is one way for CATCO to learn from other theatres, and for other theatres to learn from CATCO. Disseminating such information strengthens the theatre community.

ADDITIONAL RESEARCH

Theatres in general are often operating with inadequate information regarding the reasons audiences make the choices they do. There is much still to be done. One thing is sure, theatre, in the mind of the public is a form of entertainment, as much as it is a “high art.” This fact leaves many important questions: How do people choose their entertainment? When do people make their decision to attend the theatre, and what are the triggers? For theatre, which media are the most effective for marketing? Who makes the majority of family entertainment decisions, and how does that affect the decision made? Is the entertainment choice affected by which member or members of the household is responsible for paying? Does theatre education increase theatre participation in children? In adults? Do subscriptions increase long-term attendance? Are other forms of subscribing more or less popular with infrequent theatre-goers and non-attenders?

Certainly, one study cannot answer all these questions. In fact, in this evolving process, the questions themselves keep changing. But there is much fertile ground for research. Audience development itself is an ambiguous concept, difficult to see and to measure, difficult even to
agree on a definition for. But information that would allow theatres to make educated decisions is available and would be helpful.

CONCLUSION

Contemporary American Theatre Company of Columbus, as a mid-sized, non-profit theatre company, is searching for ways to thrive in a competitive market economy. CATCO understands the importance of its audience. The leadership within the organization is taking concrete steps to insure the future of the organization through effective planning and development. These steps include, but are not limited to, hiring a marketing director, developing a strategic plan that includes marketing, creating new educational programs, surveying its audience, and seeking feedback from subscribers who do not renew their subscriptions.

CATCO's leadership has a variety of theories about who its audience is, and why they attend. Some of these reasons ring true with the data from the focus groups, but there is much more to know. For instance, while quality is important to audience members, it alone is insufficient to promote audience development, providing a reminder that attention must be directed at more than the productions. A customer may acknowledge the quality level of a show, while disliking the seats or the air conditioning or the parking or the language. A patron may enjoy the variety of shows but would attend more if the plays were organized differently or contained a different genre. There are
so many factors involved that it is necessary to ask individual audience members and non-members about their personal experience. The point is that a theatre company cannot precisely know the audience's needs without asking.

There will always be people who don't want to attend the theatre. There will always be single ticket buyers who choose only to see one or two shows because they don't like certain offerings, or because of time or financial constraints. However, there also are people who are ready and willing to jump in and buy their first ticket, or their first subscription. By identifying those people, and showing them how it can serve their needs, CATCO can move them to the next level of commitment.

CATCO has the information. It regularly surveys and questions. Collating and interpreting that information perhaps has not been a strong suit. Also, it needs to use the information to guide decisions, both for today and strategically. This is valid for other theatres as well. For successful audience development, there must be a strong organizational commitment to the process. It must become a vital part of all that is done.

CATCO already uses many of the classic elements in audience development, including all those identified by Morison and Dalgleish. However, programming, marketing, education, publicity, technology,
and communications are just part of the support system for a theatre. The creation of live theatre involves staff, volunteers, the board, the actors and the technicians. The study of audience development is not just about a theatre and its audience, but also about the interdependence of all the aspects of a theatre's existence. Ultimately, it is not enough to investigate only the theatre, or only the audience or only the non-attenders. When all the areas are understood and action is taken, then the synergy occurs, then begins the real work of audience development.
APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

How do you define audience development?

What are the components of audience development?
Do you include any of the following:
   Marketing
   Publicity/public relations
   Programming
   Educational Programming
   Promotion

Discuss the relevance of audience development to theatres in general.

What is the role of audience development in this organization?

How does CATCO maintain current subscribers?

How does CATCO attract new audience members?

Are there any strategic plans for audience development?

What attracts people to CATCO?

What keeps people attending shows?

What are the barriers to attendance at CATCO shows?

What evidence illustrates that your work as ______________ affects the audience?
APPENDIX B

FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

Why do you attend/not attend CATCO productions?


What are you looking for in a theatre experience?

Why do you subscribe/not subscribe to CATCO?

What is your opinion of CATCO's play selections? What would you do differently? Is there a particular genre that you prefer or strongly dislike?

What is your opinion of CATCO's marketing efforts?

Do you read the production reviews?

How do you find out about the shows?

What do your friends think about CATCO? If a play is good, do you tell them to go? If a play is not good, do you tell them to stay away?

Have you participated in any of CATCO's educational offerings?

Do you feel CATCO is a good value?

What would increase your attendance?

What could CATCO do differently that would increase your attendance?

Do you foresee your attendance patterns changing in the future? In what way? Why?
APPENDIX C

SAMPLE LETTER AND RESPONSE CARD
April 1, 1999

Dear ____________,

I am writing to invite you to take part in a CATCO focus group in mid-April. Allow me to introduce myself. I am Jennifer Sanders, a graduate student at Ohio State University; I am working with my advisor, Dr. James Hutchens on an audience analysis study of theater.

That may sound rather technical, but what I want to do is understand the theatre audience's needs and the reasons why people buy a subscription. I am also interested in some of the reasons why people don't attend theatre. I am doing this with the cooperation of CATCO, and sharing the information with them to aid in their ongoing audience support efforts.

I am seeking a group of people who have not attended CATCO shows, who are willing to talk about the reasons they decided not to attend. For participating in the focus group, you will receive a pass for two tickets that can be used at any show during the remainder of the season.

The session will be held in the CATCO conference room on Saturday, April 18 from 10 am to 12 noon. That morning, there will be signs at the Riffe Center directing you to the conference room.

I am looking for a limited number people to participate in this group. Enclosed you will find an addressed, stamped response card. Please respond by Monday, April 12. Attendance at the focus group constitutes implied consent for my use of the data collected in my thesis. To ensure your privacy, I will not mention anyone by name, or in a way that could identify someone. I will continue to accept participants until the spaces have been filled.

I urge you to consider sharing your thoughts and opinions on April 18.

Sincerely,

Jennifer Sanders
Name ________________________________

Yes, I will attend the focus group on
Saturday, April 17 __________

Please list your phone number so I can confirm your attendance
______________________________

No, I will not attend the focus group __________
REFERENCES


