

IMPORTANCE OF PUBLICITY AND MARKETING IN THEATRE MANAGEMENT IN SELECT NIGERIAN UNIVERSITIES

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Abstract

Live theatre patronage in Nigeria has dwindled due to certain factors which are both external and internal. The internal factors which is the concern of this study is centered around publicity and marketing in educational theatres in Nigeria. The study believes that there is no effective publicity/marketing management in educational theatres in Nigeria. In the study the survey and literary methodologies were used to gather data for the research. The survey method includes interviews and observation. The study discovered that educational theatres in Nigeria are plagued with problems of inadequate funding and facilities. Consequently, publicity and marketing aspects of the theatre are not properly funded nor carried out in the best way possible. To resolve this issue, the study recommends that resident publicity directors should be more creative and aggressive in their publicity and marketing endeavours. Ways of achieving these could be through the formulation of written proposals aimed at seeking external sponsors that could fund the theatres either in cash or in kind thus, providing alternative means of financial stability outside of the usual stipends the university authorities provide. Publicity directors in Nigerian universities theatres should be adequately trained to manage the little funds allotted to them in an efficient manner. This could be achieved through the selection of cost effective but audience attracting publicity techniques that will draw attention to the theatre and hence, improve patronage as well as income generation possibilities.

Key Words: Publicity, Marketing, Live Performance Theatre, University, Management.

Introduction

Live theatre performances in Nigeria have come a long way. From the era of Hubert Ogunde who in 1944 started commercial theatre practice in Nigeria to the present day, theatre has gone through various stages of development. At the beginning of live theatre practice in Nigeria, there was usually a large audience turn out because aside festivals, theatre was then virtually the only means of entertainment in Nigeria. With the advent of television and film, there arose a formidable amount of competition for theatre audience. Because of the ubiquitous nature of film and television, attendance of live theatre has reduced considerably over the years. In view of the above, it has become imperative that there be set proactive measures to resurrect society's initial enthusiasm towards live theatre and performances. The article therefore proffers the need for effective publicity and marketing to attract audience to the theatre and thereby re-igniting the dwindling interest in live performances. Consequently, there is need for effective publicity and marketing to attract audience to the theatre.

Due to the fact that money from the box office alone can hardly sustain any theatre in Nigeria, it is expedient for theatre organizations in Nigeria to have external sponsors. Hence, the need for creative and aggressive marketing for sponsors, and participants in all aspects to live theatre and performance.

The above expositions emphasize the importance of marketing and publicity to the theatre. Publicity in theatre parlance is any promotional method employed to attract the audience to the theatre. It could be in form of advertising, public relations, sales promotion, press releases and press conferences, interviews, etc, while marketing is the identification of the needs of the customers and devising methods to satisfy these needs at a specific time, place and price profitably. The duties of the theatre marketer include the introduction of the theatre to the audience, patrons and would be sponsors. This should be done with the aim of making the aforementioned groups to attend and enjoy the live productions which may inevitably lead to sponsorship of the theatre as well. The theatre marketer interacts with the audience through well designed campaigns which are effective communication tools with the capability of reaching a wide range of potential audience within a short period.

The purpose of this study is to evaluate the importance of theatre publicity and marketing in the management of theatres in some selected Nigerian universities as a case study. While the objectives of the study are to appraise how theatre publicity and marketing are applied in the management of theatres in the select universities and the challenges encountered in employing marketing and publicity in the management of theatres in the select universities. The research methodologies utilized in this study include the survey and literary methods. Three universities – University of Benin, University of Port Harcourt and Ambrose Alli University, Ekpoma are used as case studies.

Publicity and Marketing in the Theatre.

Publicity is a concept that has been misconstrued and misunderstood by a lot of people, including marketing communication practitioners. They tend to view publicity as the same as public relations and advertising. Whereas, publicity is a distinct element of marketing communication.

In communication parlance, publicity is simply viewed as placing stories in the mass media (Adegoke, 2001:3). In a similar vein, Cutlip and Centre in Adegoke (2001:14) assert that: "Publicity is the dissemination of information, the making of issues public for the purpose of informing others... it involves the systematic distribution of information about an individual or a corporate body".

Furthermore, Evans and Barman in Odiboh (2002:44) described publicity as: "The non - personal stimulation of demand for a product service by placing news about it in various media or press, radio and television that is not paid for by an identified sponsor". A very salient revelation in this definition is that publicity is not paid for, it is free. That notwithstanding, in the present day Nigeria, the 'freeness' of publicity is debatable.

Nevertheless, the term publicity is used differently in theatre parlance. In theatre, Oshionebo and Idebi (2009:91) view theatre publicity as: "a process of creating awareness of the availability of a theatrical product". Clifford (1972:136) sees it as seeking "to inform and persuade the general public to purchase tickets and attend a production". For the purpose of this study, publicity is viewed as any form of marketing promotion or communication aimed at attracting the audience to the theatre.

Types of publicity in the Theatre:

Ayakoroma (2014:85) outlines the following kinds or media of publicity in the theatre - Radio, Television, Newspaper, Poster, Handbills, Brochures, Billboards, Banners, Mail, Novelty, Guerrilla, Interpersonal, Telephone, E-Mail, Fax, Bulk SMS, Interest, Social Media Platforms.

Also Clifford (1972:138-178) mentioned the following forms of publicity in the theatre. They include - Radio and Television publicity, Direct Mail Publicity and Novelty publicity. Reid (1983: 80-99) also highlighted the various forms of theatre publicity applied in the theatre as - Newspaper Advertising, Television, Radio, Press Release, Magazines, Posters, Leaflets, Brochures, and Mailing.

Following hereunder is an appraisal of the major forms of theatre publicity as enumerated above.

(a) Radio

Radio is an efficient means of mass communication. It has a very wide coverage and captive audience. It is convenient to use because it can be moved from place to place and it can be listened to while doing other things.

Radio publicity could take the form of jingles, on- spot announcements, news, talk shows or interviews, spot light, magazines, request or greeting programmes (Ayakoroma, 2014:83). Radio is a very good means to publicize a theatrical production. Apart from radio advertisement which may be costly to embark upon, the publicity director can creatively make use of other publicity methods on radio, like - interviews, press releases, news conferences, etc, where much money will not be expended.

(b) Television:

Television is regarded as the most powerful medium of mass commemoration because of its ability to combine the audio and visual elements of communication. Television is quite captivating as a means of communication; it requires absolute attention from the viewer if he is not going to miss any details.

A television promotion of a production could take the form of announcements with captions, news, interviews, a spot commercial (Ayakoroma, 2014:86). Television advertisement is expensive, hence, it may be out of reach of an average educational theatre outfit. It is advisable that publicity directors should create a rapport between them and the television house so that they can broadcast news, interviews about the organization free of charge or in exchange for other mutually benefiting services. However, if the theatre outfit can afford to pay for a television spot commercial, it is quite advantageous because it is very informative and expressive.

(c) Newspaper:

Again, Ayakoroma (2014:86) asserts that: "Newspaper publicity takes the form of news, opinion page, editorials, previews and reviews". There could also be placements of paid ads- which could be in full page, half page, quarter page, earpiece, or classified. It can also be in form of publication of images about the production in the newspaper. It could be pictures taken during rehearsals or in past productions. Reid (1983:80-81) states that "there are two types of newspaper advertising, classified and display. Every theatre needs to appear in the entertainment section of the classified of its local paper. This is where the regular audience will look to check what's on..."

Classified adverts are smaller in size than the display adverts. As such, it is less expensive to use in theatre publicity, especially in educational theatre that has the consistent problem of funding. Although, the display adverts are more conspicuous, but because of the high cost of purchasing adverts space in the newspaper,

it is advisable that educational theatre should go for classified adverts that are more cost effective. Through this means classified advert insertions can be purchased on different days and times.

(d) Poster:

A poster is a kind of graphic communication that can be used to publicize a theatrical product. Posters are used for specific purposes: to inform, to persuade, to sell and to stimulate audience's interest. (Clifford, 187:46).

He further asserts that to be effective, a poster has to be:

- I. Attractive,
- II. Simple,
- III. Appropriate for the play,
- IV. Economical,
- V. Informative,

He also specifies that a poster should minimally have the following contents –

- VI. The name of the producing organization,
- VII. The title, author and the director of the play,
- VIII. The venue, date and time of showing and
- IX. Ticket information.

In summary, a poster should be very attractive and informative. It should be well-composed, effective, well – illustrated and with attractive colours. In final analysis, “the essential thing is to ensure that the posters are removed after the production so that any new one will draw attention easily” (Ayakoroma, 2014:87). None systematic removal of the poster after production can lead to defacing and littering of the environment. As such, it is necessary to remove the posters after productions.

(e) Handbills:

According to Reid (1983:93) handbills are also known as leaflets and throwaways. They are handy publicity materials that could be distributed on the street, in buses, in trains, ships, markets, super markets, libraries, schools, offices, etc (Ayakoroma, 2014:87). Most times, handbills or leaflets are miniaturized posters. All the information in the poster are also contained in the handbill, in a smaller version of the poster.

(f) Direct Mail:

Direct mail publicity consists of “any publicity material sent by mail to specific prospects on a large scale. It includes a number of forms such as postcards, letters, brochures, folders and flyers, that are sent out for the purpose of obtaining orders...” (Clifford, 1972: 168). In a similar vein, Ayakoroma (2014:88) propounds that direct mail “involves the use of postal services to keep the theatre patrons abreast of what is happening. Brochures, tickets, and season’s information are mailed to them well in advance”.

It must be noted that direct mail publicity can only be effective in advanced countries with good postal services. It is also quite expensive to pay for the postal services of reaching each person. The next snag in using direct mail is compiling the mailing list. This can be compiled by keeping records of the patrons that attend the theatre. This can also be achieved through audience research. To be effective, the mailing list needs constant updating, so that those that have changed addresses can still be captured, while those who are no longer available are removed from the list.

(g) Guerrilla or Jungle Publicity:

This is a form of publicity in which the publicity crew physically go around town or campus dancing, singing and attracting the would be audience and at the same time telling them about the performance and sharing flyers or handbills to them. At times, bits of the expected drama are performed to give the audience an insight into what they will get when they come to the theatre.

Presently, Jungle publicity has advanced into what is called a “music blast” – a situation where music equipment is mounted on a vehicle and it blasts music around the environment and the publicity crew dances to it and distributes handbills. It is advanced because it can reach more persons, instead of using ordinary voice to announce the programme, microphone is applied in music blast. This is a very effective way of publicizing a production especially in an educational theatre.

(h) Interpersonal or Word – of – Mouth Publicity:

This kind of publicity is one-on-one kind of publicity. It derives from word – of – mouth, from one person to another. It is highly interpersonal and intimate. It is one of the cheapest and the most effective means of publicity in an educational theatre. It can be in form of the publicity crew moving from one hostel room to another or addressing students in class. It can be effective because you have instant feedback and you can also sell your tickets in the process or collect research data from the prospective audience.

(i) Telephone:

In this modern era, telephone publicity can be effective, because almost every adult uses a telephone these days. Phone calls can be made to some important theatre patrons and prospective audience. It can also be in form of sending short messages to them (SMS) intimating them about the theatre's programmes.

(j) Internet, E-Mail and Social Media Platforms:

The use of the internet is a situation where the theatre organization feeds information about its activities into its website. This way, anybody who accesses the web will come across such information and act on them. It is another cost effective way of publicity.

While electronic mails are an effective and less expensive means of publicity, it is an invention of the computer age. The computer could be used to send letters to different email addresses at the same time. It is also very cost effective in the sense that the mail could be copied to many persons (Ayakoroma, 2014:87). In terms of social media, "the internet now provides various social media platforms for production publicity ranging from Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Badoo, Tube, Skype, WhatsApp, Viber, and Blackberry Messages to mention just a few (Ayakoroma, 2014:90).

In educational theatre publicity, social media networking is very expedient due to the fact that the major targets are students, who are predominantly youths, who are now obsessed with the social media. As such, any information sent through social media patronized by students will definitely get to them. Special group or pages can be opened by theatre organization in the social media networks and messages placed on them and sent to various persons in the groups. It is a cost effective way of getting across to a significant number of potential theatre audience.

Publicity is very crucial to the survival of any theatrical organization. This is because, it is through publicity that audiences are attracted to the theatre. The publicity director or the business manager should be very creative and know the publicity methods that will serve their theatre effectively in a cost effective manner. Before you embark on any publicity campaign, you should be abreast of the cost and the money that you are expected to make through that publicity. As such, you should not just use a publicity method because it is attractive; it has to be cost effective and profitable. In this present generation, social media platform and website advertisement should be given adequate attention, because the target audience in educational theatres are now internet freaks, as such the social media is a means of reaching them effectively.

X. Theatre Marketing:

Before delving into the meaning of theatre marketing, it is essential to first of all look at the concept of marketing. According to the American Marketing Association as cited in Kolb (2005:69), marketing is "the process of planning, executing the conception, pricing, promotion and distribution of ideas, goods, and services to create exchange that satisfy individual and organizational goals". Kolb himself opines that "marketing consists of making goods and services attractive and then communicating their availability to potential customers..." (Kolb 2005: 69).

Awodiya (2017:213) propounds that marketing is a system of business activities designed to plan, price, promote and distribute products, goods and services for the benefit of the customers." Oyewo (2006:175) simply views marketing as the "ability to get people to buy your products or services".

Furthermore, Eni (2014:45) states that the goal of marketing is "to meet customers' needs and wants with products that customers can and will buy". From the perspective of this study, marketing is perceived as the art and science of identifying the needs of the customers and satisfying them at the right price, time and place with minimum waste and maximum profit. What marketing does is to through research identify the needs of the customers and device profitable means to satisfy these needs.

Ayakoroma (2014) sums up the activities of the marketing process thus:

Marketing involves certain fundamental processes and their understanding is vital. Firstly, it entails finding out what consumers want. Secondly based on the above, it involves planning and developing a product or service that will satisfy those wants. Thirdly it involves determining the best way to price, promote and distribute the product or service (P. 77).

In terms of theatre marketing, (Nwamuo, 2003) proposes that it is:

The performance of theatre business activities, which direct the flow of theatre goods and cultural services from the producer to the consumers or clients with a view to satisfying them, and at the same time accomplishing the company's objectives. The marketing process involves estimating of demand for the product to satisfy profit criteria and, promoting and distributing the product (P. 91).

Nwamuo also views arts marketing as a “dynamic activity which focuses attention on the satisfaction of audiences and consumers in relation to their education and cultural needs.” Adedina (2006:99) states that theatre marketing is the “concerted efforts of theatre personal towards the satisfaction of theatre audiences.” She opines that theatre marketing lays pragmatic emphasis on the needs and satisfaction of the audience. She sees theatre marketing as an integrated part of the production process from the initial stage of the conception/selection of ideas to the actual performance, in a manner that will be rewarding to both the audience and theatre practitioner.

Adedina (2006:100) further asserts to the fact that theatre marketing involves four major processes, which include – marketing concept, marketing research, marketing plan and marketing mix. **Marketing concept** is a basic approach of running a whole business with the customer as the focus of attention and not the product, company or technological process. Marketing concept is the recognition of and acceptance of the customer-oriented way of doing business. **Marketing research** involves a deliberate and careful study of the audience: where he lives, what he does and what his ambitions are, etc; that is the demographic and psychographic survey of the audience. **Marketing plan** on the other hand concerns itself with the satisfaction of the audience needs, physically or psychologically. Marketing plan makes use of the data collected during market research to make adequate plans for the organization.

Kotler, (1997:92) defines **Marketing mix** as “the set of marketing tools that the firm uses to pursue its marketing objectives in the target market”. He further asserts that non-profit organizations (like educational theatre) make good use of marketing because of the desire for large audiences. Adedina (2006:102) opines that marketing mix is made up of four elements which include – product, price, place and promotion.

For the purpose of detailed analysis and artistic viewpoint, a **product** in marketing mix is defined as anything that can be offered to a market for attention, acquisition, use or consumption and that might satisfy a want or need (Fosudo; 2014:24). Ododo and Hassan (2014:228) see the product as the art itself, being the service rendered by the actors, dancers and other performers on stage. In more general terms, Achumba and Osuagwu (1994:103) define a product as “the totality of what a firm has to offer, including how the product is communicated to the consumers or clients, and the value attached to the product”.

Therefore, the product can be seen as the theatrical performance in its entirety. It could be a play, dance, music, cultural exhibition etc. The product is a series of preparations (rehearsals) before the performance. The actual performance is the theatrical product that the producer sells to the audience. It must be noted that theatrical products are intangible, they cannot be touched; hence, they are grouped as services. They can only be enjoyed through an experience that takes hold of one’s visual emotional senses within a defined venue and cannot be taken away like tangible products.

Secondly, **price** is the condition or value usually monetary in nature attached to the production before an audience can partake of it. The price is the cost to be paid before the production can be watched by the audience. The determining factor in fixing the price of a production is based on the costs involved in the production. This is followed by the desire of the prospective members of the audience. The price may seem to be higher if the audience is keen to watch the production.

The **place** is simply described as the venue or location which the production takes place in. In deciding the place of performance, accessibility proximity and convenience factors must be considered. Finally, **promotion** is viewed as any communication activity aimed at attracting the audience to the theatre. Promotion is packaged in a way to attract the audience. Without promotion, the audience will not be aware of the activities of the theatre organization. As such, promotion is very expedient in the theatre marketing. The study sees theatre marketing as the art and science of identifying the entertainment needs of the audience and devising effective means to satisfy these needs at the right time, place and price in a profitable manner. Invariably, theatre marketing begins with identifying the needs of the audience through research and subsequently attempting to provide the services at the right time, place and price, with the final aim of satisfying the audience needs and making profit.

Theatre Publicity and Marketing in Select Universities in Nigeria:

To discuss the issue of theatre publicity and marketing in Nigerian Universities, this study has selected three universities, which include –University of Benin, Department of Theatre Arts, Ambrose Alli University, Ekpoma, Department of Theatre and Media Arts, University of Port Harcourt, Department of Theatre and Film studies. It must be noted that theatre publicity and marketing are practiced in Nigerian Universities. This article intends to determine the extent to which it is practiced as well as the challenges involved. However, it must be noted that most university theatres lay more emphasis on the artistic aspect of production than on publicity and marketing. Hence, the low patronage of the theatre. Buttressing this assertion, Eni (2014:46) states that, “many theatre organizations operate under a product-centered viewpoint, “focusing attention chiefly on the artwork rather than considering the audiences”. He states that

in Nigerian theatre today, studies on audience management are scarce or non-existent; while studies in theatre marketing are even harder to come by.

Presently at the University of Benin theatre, publicity and marketing practice is at its lowest ebb. In the past, Uniben theatre was known for its vibrant jungle publicity culture, but this is almost moribund. The students are no longer interested in it. Though attempts are made to revive that practice. The question now is how do they publicize their productions? The Uniben theatre presently uses banners and posters to publicize their productions. Even the use of banner is not always efficiently done because they just place only a banner in the front of the box office. They do not extend it to other parts of the campus. They also make use of word-of-mouth publicity by announcing about the productions from class room to class room or from one hostel room to the other as the case may be. In terms of marketing, there has not been any obvious attempt to market the Uniben Theatre in the last ten years. No audience survey has been carried out and the theatre has not done any creative and aggressive marketing for external sponsors. They depend on the sponsorship they get from the university authority which is quite meagre. Hence, departmental productions are not frequent.

The basic problem encountered at the Uniben theatre is inadequate funding and lack of facilities. Due to the paucity of funding, little money is set aside for publicity and marketing; more attention is given to the artistic aspects like lighting, set, costume, etc. That notwithstanding, the management of the theatre needs to be involved in creative and aggressive marketing of their activities. This is because, without the audience the theatre venture becomes a failure. There is a need for the theatre administrators/managers to embark on in-depth audience survey to know the desires and preferences of the audiences and then work towards the fulfilment of such needs. The Uniben theatre should revisit the publicity tradition they had in the 80s and 90s – that is aggressive jungle publicity matched with creative use of posters, flyers and banners.

The Department of Theatre and Media Arts (Ekpoma Theatre) of the Ambrose Alli University is not remarkably different from the Uniben theatre. Only that while jungle publicity has almost gone moribund in Uniben Theatre, the Ekpoma Theatre depend largely on jungle publicity and posters for their publicity. According to their former Head of Department, Dr. Mariam Iyeh, the Ekpoma Theatre also suffers from lack of adequate funding and facilities. The Ekpoma Theatre does not embark on marketing for external sponsors presently. She said that they tried that in the past without success, hence they were discouraged. Finally, the Department of Theatre and Film Studies, (Uniport), University of Port Harcourt, also mostly make use of what they call guerilla publicity (jungle publicity) and posters for their publicity. They do not embark on mass media publicity due to paucity of funds and because most of their target audience are on campus. According to the former Head of Department Dr. Innocent Ohiri in an interview, they do not market for external sponsors. When probed further for the reason why they do not do that, he said that being an educational theatre, it is at variance with their mandate, and that it will distract them as academics. The study believes that due to the inadequate funding they get from university authorities in Nigeria, educational theatres must survive must make it a point of duty to market for external sponsors consistently, creatively and aggressively. The success of this will make educational theatres vibrant and efficient. To debunk this erroneous belief that educational theatre, being a non-profit organization should not make profit or seek for sponsors, a renowned theatre manager in Nigeria, Muyiwa Awodiya (2017) propounds:

There is nowhere in any regulation or law does it say that non-profit arts organizations cannot have profits. For profit and non-profit arts organizations need profits for survival. The profit arts organization makes will help it to pay off debts, and put money aside for investment purposes. (P. 216)

To buttress the above assertion, Awodiya states that “if the arts are to increase their survivability in Nigeria in the 21st century, they must find new ways of expanding their audience and their sources of financial investment... Arts institutions in Nigeria must become more aggressive in marketing...” (P.197). He also prescribes that arts managers in Nigeria should adopt a modern marketing orientation that will be audience centered; rely heavily on research; segment its audience, utilize “marketing mix”, not just communication and persuasion but also information. (P.192).

Irrespective of poor funding for publicity and marketing in these university theatres, the business managers or the publicity directors should make creative and efficient use of the little fund at their disposal to create an audience attracting but cost effective publicity campaign and establish a benefitting marketing strategy that will elevate the financial standing of the theatres. Despite educational theatres being non-profit making in nature, it is the belief of the authors that they should and can seek for external sponsors outside the university or even outside the department.

Conclusion and Recommendations:

This study concludes that there are some challenges facing educational theatre publicity and marketing in Nigeria. The main challenge is lack of adequate funding of publicity activities of the theatres. There is also a lack of creativity on the part of publicity managers in managing the little funds at their disposal for publicity.

Consequently, the study recommends the following –:

1. Educational theatre managers in Nigeria should increase the publicity and marketing budgets of their theatres despite poor funding. They should not over concentrate on the artistic aspects/quality of the production at the expense of publicity and marketing. This is because, no matter how good a production is artistically, if there is no corresponding box office success, the production becomes a failure. It is the publicity that draws the audience to the theatre, hence, it attracts the needed fund through gate fees to run the theatre effectively.
2. The publicity directors in educational theatres in Nigeria should be more creative, consistent and aggressive in their approach. They should be able to manage the little fund allocated to them to achieve audience attracting by cost effective publicity. They should select those publicity methods that are cost effective and efficient. Efforts should be made for instance to revive and popularize “jungle publicity”, in Nigerian universities. This is because it is very efficient and it also brings good image to the theatre if creatively handled. Where the campus is large, like university of Port Harcourt, the jungle publicity can be upgraded to “music blast”. That is a musical carnival float, where vehicles can be used to transport the participants from one point to another, instead of them trekking.
3. Due to the current internet craze by the youths who are the main audience of educational theatres in Nigeria, publicity directors should explore the internet as a means of publicity. They should consider opening a website for their theatres. They can also open dedicated pages or groups on the social media like Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, Twitter, etc where information about the theatre can be hoisted. This will be a very efficient publicity method because the youths (students) are always on line for one reason or the other.
4. Lastly, the publicity directors in educational theatres in Nigeria should embark on aggressive marketing strategies to attract external sponsors to the theatre. It is not the view of the authors that it is wrong for educational theatres to attract external sponsors. They should write attractive proposals and send out to prospective patrons. It must be stated that looking for theatre sponsors could be frustrating, but the theatre manager should be persistent in their pursuits, they should not be discouraged.

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