



AACT Resource Library

## Break a Leg, Not the Bank

### A Guide to Promoting Shows and Buying Effective Advertising

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If you think your theatre can survive on hopes, dreams, and jazz hands alone, I hate to break it to you, but not even Bob Fosse could choreograph his way out of empty seats.

As your friendly AACT marketing expert (who's logged enough theatre hours to recite *Wicked* backward), I'm here to deliver some tough love: community theatres must grow their investments in paid advertising, or we might as well be performing to our cats.

Gone are the days when "if you build it, they will come" worked for theatres. (True, that was actually about baseball, but even Kevin Costner had to deal with marketing, eventually.)

Today's entertainment landscape is more crowded than a tech week rehearsal schedule, and your beautiful production of *Our Town* is competing with Netflix, TikTok, and whatever new streaming service just launched while you were reading this sentence.

You're also competing with the largest influx of paid advertising in our history. In 2023, total media ad spending in the United States was \$350 billion, with digital advertising accounting for 74.6% of that total. And you ask your marketing team, "Why isn't anyone seeing our social media posts?" That's why.

Let's look at some sobering statistics: many community theatres report attendance has been declining, with a number of venues reporting 20-30% drops in ticket sales. They still struggle to return to ticket-sale numbers from 2018 and 2019. Yet, when I ask theatres about their marketing budgets, they often respond with the same embarrassment as if I'd caught them singing "Memory" in the shower!

Here's the truth: relying solely on organic social media posts, desperately hopeful press releases, and your board member's cousin's Facebook share is not a marketing strategy—it's

wishful thinking. The myth of "we can't afford advertising" needs to exit stage left, because the reality is you can't afford *not* to advertise.

So, let's talk numbers that won't make your treasurer faint. A healthy marketing budget for a community theatre should be between 15-26% of your annual operating budget. Before you gasp dramatically, remember that empty seats cost more than advertising ever will.

Let's look at what a general ad strategy looks like for a production.

## Your Marketing Timeline

### 3 Months Out:

- Show-specific campaign development
- Target previous single-ticket buyers from similar productions
- Launch initial digital advertising **tests** (awareness phase)

### 6 Weeks Out:

- Full campaign rollout (awareness phase continues)
- Multi-channel advertising begins
- Heavy digital push

### 3 Weeks Out:

- Increase ad frequency (consideration phase)
- Retargeting campaigns

### Week Of Show:

- Retargeting campaigns (conversion phase)
- Last-minute ticket promotions (targeted and segmented audiences)
- Refresh creative messaging

## Your Marketing Mix: Where to Spend

Let's break down where your marketing budget should go—and no, "printing more flyers" isn't the answer. (Though if your flyers could tap dance, we might reconsider.)

- *Paid Social Media (25%):* Facebook and Instagram ads are your chorus line—they do the heavy lifting. Target your audience based on interests, demographics, and previous

engagement. Pro tip: If you're doing *Cats*, please resist the urge to only target cat owners.

- *Streaming Video/OTT (15%)*: Place ads on streaming platforms like Hulu, YouTube TV, and local streaming news. These platforms offer the targeting of digital with the impact of television.
- *Streaming Audio (10%)*: Spotify, Pandora, and podcast ads reach audiences while they're commuting, working, or (let's be honest) avoiding work.
- *Google Ads (10%)*: When people search "things to do this weekend" or "local theatre," you want to appear faster than an eager understudy.
- *Display Advertising (5%)*: Use retargeting ads that follow your website visitors around the internet like a persistent stage mother. They work.
- *Email Marketing (5%)*: Yes, you should pay for a proper email service. Your stage manager's Excel spreadsheet from 2015 doesn't count.

### **Digital First, But Not Digital-only**

While digital advertising should take the lion's share of your budget (aim for 60-70%), ignoring traditional media is like performing "Singing in the Rain" without the rain. Your marketing mix should be as diverse as a musical theatre kid's audition book.

### **Traditional Media (30-40% of total budget)**

- *Print (10%)*: Strategic, not scattered. One well-placed ad in your target audience's favorite publication beats a hundred quarter-page ads in random newsletters.
- *Radio (15%)*: Local radio isn't dead; it's just waiting for its second act. A good opportunity to reach commuters and local business owners. And they often give lots of perks - like airtime on the station to promote your productions!
- *Outdoor (5-15%)*: Location matters more than size. One billboard near your theatre beats three in the middle of nowhere.

## Making Every Dollar Work Harder

Measurement of marketing efforts isn't optional anymore. Just as you wouldn't skip dress rehearsal, you shouldn't skip tracking your marketing results.

Essential metrics to track:

- Cost per ticket sale
- Return on ad spend (ROAS)
- Website traffic sources
- Email open and click rates
- Social media engagement-to-conversion rates

Pro tip: Google Analytics is free and more valuable than that box of donated costumes from the 1980s. Be sure it captures both your website and Facebook and Instagram traffic and insights.

## Building (and Keeping) Audiences

Think of audience development like casting a show: you need a mix of reliable veterans and fresh faces. Allocate your advertising budget accordingly:

- 50% to attract new audiences
- 30% to retain current patrons
- 20% to win back lapsed attendees

### Practical Tips for Implementation

Quick Wins:

1. Start small but start now. Test \$100 on Facebook ads before committing to larger budgets.
2. Use your audience data. What shows sold best last season—and why? Target similar demographics.
3. Create a simple dashboard to track results. What gets measured gets funded.

Common Pitfalls to Avoid:

- Don't spread your budget too thin
- Avoid changing strategies before giving them time to work
- Never skip testing and measuring results
- Don't assume what worked last season will work this season

## The Final Bow

Remember, marketing today is as crucial to your theatre's success as your lighting design. (And yes, I know you're still using some instruments from the 1970s, but that's a discussion for another day.)

Your community theatre brings magic to your area, but even magic needs a marketing budget. Start small if you must, but start *somewhere*. Test, measure, adjust, and watch your audience grow. Because at the end of the day, the only thing better than a standing ovation is a standing ovation from a full house.

Remember, to paraphrase Stephen Sondheim, "the path to ticket sales isn't always a straight line.. Sometimes you have to go into the woods to come out with a full house."

Now, go forth and advertise—your audiences are waiting and on their phones.

### Two Key Marketing Concepts

#### Ad Testing & Measurement

Marketers use testing to evaluate and improve their ads *before* launching an advertising campaign. Testing involves showing ads to a representative sample of your target audience and then gathering response data to measure the ads' effectiveness. The goal is to ensure that the ad you send to your *entire* target audience delivers the intended message, enhances engagement, and improves sales.

#### Retargeting

In general, retargeting is a digital marketing strategy that involves advertising to people who have previously interacted with your theatre company—by visiting your website (to purchase tickets, for example) or connecting via social media platforms. More specifically, "retargeting ads" follow customers around the internet—in the case of a theatre company, reminding them about you and your offerings by displaying ads on other sites they visit across the web. This is accomplished via tracking cookies placed on their browser when they first visit your site. For more information, visit



**Julie Nemitz** is a marketing expert who's shaking things up in the world of live theatre. She is the founder of [Theatre Marketing Lab](#), a consultancy dedicated to helping theatre artists and organizations grow audiences and amplify their work in the digital space—with a big dose of content marketing magic and a whole lot of innovative brand strategy. Julie is passionate about working with theatre makers, coaching them to harness the power of marketing to build their theatre's brand. She also serves as adjunct faculty at Western Michigan University, teaching Theatre Arts Marketing to the next generation of artists.