

From the AACT Knowledge Base

How to Design a Great Season Brochure

Know your reader, plan every inch, keep it simple

If you're like most theater companies, your season brochure is your single most important marketing piece, followed by your general company brochure. Since so much rides on these pieces it's important to understand exactly what works--and why.

General Principles

Let's start with two, seemingly opposing principles. First, brochures often carry a lasting message. At least one study shows that half the people who receive a brochure will save it or pass it on to someone else. The more attractive and informative, the more likely the piece is to be saved. So it makes sense to plan and execute your season brochure with as much care as possible.

However, while the message may be lasting, the reader's attention is not. Again, studies indicate that when people pick up a brochure, most skim it, skipping around rather than reading from front to back. That makes writing brochures a challenge, because you can't assume that the reader will read the information in the order it's placed on the page. Instead, each section of the brochure has to stand on its own to grab the reader's attention and provide necessary information.

There's no one right way to design a brochure. However, designers, printers, and direct mail experts gave us three basic rules: Make it attractive, easy to read and simple to follow.

Here are some suggestions gleaned from these same sources.

Text: Short & Sweet

There's no great secret to writing good brochures: Keep text short and to the point. Readers don't want to work hard to find what they need to know. So put yourself in the reader's place. What specific words are most likely to interest them? What kind of information are they likely to need? And what will they want to know first?

Write in personal terms so that readers will feel you're talking to them. Use "you," "your," and "you're" whenever possible, as in "You'll experience a whole world of entertainment."

Avoid empty hyperbole when describing each show in the season. Don't say the show is wonderful and exciting. Tell *why* the show is wonderful or exciting ("You'll gasp as the detective uncovers the murderer in the spine-tingling climax.") Be honest. Don't oversell your capabilities or set up false expectations.

Finally, when you write, keep in mind that short sections are easier to read. They also make the brochure design more inviting because you can break up the text with white space.

Envelope or Self-Mailer?

Most companies produce brochures that are mailed without envelopes. Such a "self-mailer" saves the cost of an envelope, and may cut postage costs by reducing weight.

However, there is something to be said for the more personal look of an envelope addressed to the patron. So if you use an envelope, be sure to make it part of the sales package. If the envelope lacks interest, the brochure has to work that much harder. One simple solution is to buy envelopes with a distinctive color that also works with the brochure.

Whether you use an envelope or a self-mailer, the outside of the piece should use an illustration, theme or line of copy from the brochure as a "teaser" (a few words that compel the reader to open the piece). A teaser might read something like "America's favorite musical," or "You'll die laughing," followed by the words "See inside for more details" in smaller print.

As most direct marketers point out, the most important thing is to get the reader to open your piece and have a look. Design the outside of your mailer with that in mind. (And if you go to the expense of using an envelope, don't defeat the purpose by using a mailing label; type or print directly on the envelope. Pieces that look individually addressed get a better response.)

Attention Grabbing

The brochure's cover must grab the reader's attention. Use a strong photo or graphic that illustrates a single idea or concept. (See below for more about photos). Keep words to a minimum and make the type big and easy to read. Like the design itself, the words should be simple, intriguing, and inviting.

Imagine you are passing out your brochure in some busy spot and it must attract attention as people stroll by. If your cover wouldn't grab *their* attention, it probably won't capture your intended audience's interest, either.

Format and Size

You may gain visibility if your brochure is different in shape and size from others that arrive in the mail. Study what your competitors are doing. Use a different format, one that helps you organize the information for your readers, or use a different way of folding.

One different approach is the calendar-brochure. This makes for a more complex brochure, but its size and shape so call attention to it.. The calendar from the Woodland Opera House was 8 1/2 inches by 5 1/2 inches, folded) and easier to read, while the more colorful brochure from the Topeka Civic Theater fit pocket or purse (4 1/4 inches by 7 1/4 inches, folded).

The postal service will not accept just any size piece--nor will every standard envelope. Dimensions also affect the price; odd sizes can mean wastage when the printer trims the piece to size. Before spending money on a nonstandard-size piece, check both with your printer and the post office.

Design Considerations

Design is more than the way text and graphics are laid on the page. Design also projects an image of your company and its season. You want to sell entertainment, fun, excitement, stimulation, and quality entertainment. .

Be sure to consider the graphic sophistication of your reader. Arts patrons tend to be well educated and are accustomed to high quality printing. If they're not familiar with your company, they may make a value judgment based on the quality (writing, paper, photography, color) of your printed piece.

Color

Sure it's expensive, but people are used to seeing color. And studies again indicate that color does add to the effectiveness of a printed piece.

Two colors are fine, and you can use tints ("screens" in printer language) to vary the richness of the colors. For example, a 50-percent screen of red gives you pink. You also can overlap screens of two colors to give the impression of three colors: Red and green overlapped become brown, yellow and blue become green, and so on.

One of the most effective uses of color we've seen used three colors on one side and four-color process on the other. Four-color processing is more expensive, but this piece used no photographs and so avoids additional pre-press work that can add substantially to the cost.

Using Photos

Photographs give information quickly and memorably. Usually, a posed shot is usually better than one actually shot in performance, where focus and lighting can be troublesome. And come in close on the actors (preferably no more than three); keep distracting backgrounds to a minimum.

Avoid grouping several photographs into a collage; one strong photo is more likely to grab the reader. If you use more than one photo, make the strongest photo much larger than the others.

Put a caption on every photograph or other illustration; research shows that people look at a photo first, then the caption. Captions should sell, not merely describe.

When choosing photos, one designer suggests that thinking how each photograph would work if your brochure were printed in a foreign language. In other words, ignore the words themselves and look at what the photo "says" about your company and its productions.

Other Art

Consider simple graphics or eye-catching illustrations to depict themes of plays. In fact, illustrations often work better than photos.

Testimonials

If you're still in the process of building community recognition, use testimonials--comments from critics or audience members. (If you aren't currently collecting testimonials, put in a "Comment Box" in the lobby with a supply of three-by-five cards.)

Order Form

If the cover is the entry point to the brochure, the order form is the exit point. If the reader gets this far, you know they are likely prospects. But it's here that many brochures are weakest.

The most common complaint about order forms is that they are too complicated. If you want good results, the form must be easy to understand. Keep details to the essentials. The design should lead the ticket buyer through each step of the process so that you collect all essential information.

Another complaint is that order forms are too small, making it hard to write legibly. We like the format of the Market House Theatre. The subscription information was presented in a vertical format, which is easy to read. The part filled out by the subscriber, on the other hand, was horizontal, giving plenty of room to write clearly.

The best way to tell if your order form does its job well is to test it. Give copies to people who are unfamiliar with it and have them try to fill it out in your presence. Observe what they look for and how easily they find it. Be on the alert for signs of confusion. And listen to what they say

Talk to your box office or ticket-order people. Find out what mistakes purchasers make most often. Then review your order form to see if it can be improved to reduce such problems. Run all forms past the box office manager to make sure the form is practical and contains all necessary information.

Review Results

When the subscription period ends, review the brochure and its impact. Keep what works, discard or improve what doesn't. Keep a file of brochures from other sources (theater-related or not) that have caught your attention, so that you'll always have new ideas from which to draw.

Finally, think of your brochure as a theatrical production. Invest in it all the care and imagination that you would a play. Readers can and do make a connection between the quality of your printed piece and the quality of your productions.