

When You Run Out of Room

How to find useable space at little or no cost

By George Ledo

At some time you may run out of storage room for scenery, props, or costumes and have to go looking for more space. Your budget, however, may not allow for the additional rent, forcing you to look for donations of space or funds with which to pay for the space.

But there is a way to turn the process into an opportunity to increase community interest in your company and generate new business. In this article we'll look at a way to seek--and find--useable space at little or no cost through local businesses.

The Plan of Attack

Before you ask anything of anyone, you need to prepare yourself to answer questions and assure prospects that you are reliable and responsible, and that you know exactly what you need in the way of space.

Local businesses may be interested in helping you, but they probably don't understand how a theatrical company functions. You must be able to respond to some very legitimate concerns such as safety (Will the stuff be flammable? Will it attract rodents?), security (Who will access the space, and at what hours?), liability, responsibility, and credibility (Are these people really serious about this?). These are issues that can stop any deal dead in its tracks.

In order to make a valid decision, the prospects need to know what kind of space you need, how much of it, and for how long. Not being in our business, they may not be aware of some important issues we take for granted, such as keeping the material clean, dry, and accessible. Also, the more they know about what you need, the easier they can figure out what it will cost and whether they can afford it.

Success by Design

In the world of professional sales, the type of concerns listed above is known as resistance--the excuses a prospect makes for not buying something. You must eliminate (or at least reduce) the resistance to your proposal by addressing those concerns before they come up.

Start by getting organized. Take a few pictures of your existing storage space; you'll use these later in a set of "before and after" shots.

Next, get ruthless. Set aside anything that will not be used again or that will cost more to repair or repaint than to build or buy. This is usually the hardest part of the project, but it's amazing how much stored material is really junk. Leave it alone for a day or two and then come back to it; review your list and make any necessary changes.

Now get creative: design (not build) a storage system (racks and shelves) for the material you need to keep, and add some space for growth. You may be able to recycle any good lumber for this purpose. Make sure the system can be configured in different ways, since you don't yet know the size and shape of your new space. (While you're at it, figure out how you will use the old

space when it becomes available.) Discard, sell, donate, or recycle all the material you won't use again.

Now start networking. Talk to your local school or college drafting instructor, tell him or her about the project, and ask for help drawing up the system in two or three different configurations, making sure to leave enough clear space for at least two people to work comfortably. If this sounds interesting enough, the teacher may assign it as a class project, and maybe even talk to the wood shop class about building it, which could result in an offer to help with construction. Using the drawings, figure out how many square feet you need and how high the space needs to be.

(By this time you've met a few new people. Stop for a moment and add them to your company's mailing list.)

Finally, determine how much you can afford to pay for the new space and how you might lower that cost. Consider things such as partial rent, or donations of season tickets, a benefit performance, free lessons, and similar items. These are all legitimate trading goods for a nonprofit organization or school.

Address the Concerns

Now that you know everything about the space you'll need, you can start addressing the concerns mentioned above:

- Safety. Again, reduce or eliminate anything that can become a fire hazard or attract pests.
- Security. Determine who in your company will need access to the space, at what times, and how that access will be controlled.
- Liability. Make sure the storage system is safe to use and that there's enough space to work. Determine who will supervise the crew that uses it. Find out if your company carries insurance and exactly what it covers.
- Responsibility. Determine who will be in charge of the space, and whose phone number will be on file at the storage location.
- Credibility. If you've handled the above tasks well, you'll be able to demonstrate your commitment to the project, and you'll have established credibility.

Determine Who to Ask

Before starting the actual search you'll need to develop a list of prospects. Sales professionals believe the best way to approach a new prospect is through a referral, so start with your own mailing list, friends, and business associates. They already know your company. What you're looking for are storage and moving firms or businesses that have warehouses or vacant space, as well as anybody who can refer you to one of these.

A great source of contacts and prospects is your local Chamber of Commerce. Call them and explain what you're trying to do. Chances are they'll be happy to help, especially when they see how well-organized your project is.

Once you have a list of 10-15 solid prospects, write each one a short letter. Mention how you obtained their name and tell them about your company and your project. Ask for an appointment to meet with them in person, and say you will follow up with a phone call in a few days. Don't mention pricing or trades yet—keep it simple for now. Include something about your company, such as a good review, picture, or flyer on the upcoming season. Mail the letter to arrive by the middle of the week.

Make Your Case

A few days later, call each prospect to make sure they received the letter and to ask for the appointment. Be sure to approach the prospect with a business project (which it is), instead of asking for charity (which it isn't).

They'll have some questions right away. Go ahead and answer them, but your primary goal now is to make the appointment, not a deal. Tell them you'll only need 20 minutes, which is about right for this type of meeting.

Make every effort to keep the meeting to the 20 minutes, by the way. Tell them about your company, show the sketches and any good reviews or pictures, and get them excited about the project. They may have doubts, but if you've done your homework you'll have most of the answers ready.

If they have space and are willing to let you use it, ask to see it but don't agree to taking it yet, since you'll want to explore other options. You may have to do a bit of negotiating here (offering those season tickets as a trade), but keep it simple; you may need to come back for a second round.

If they can offer no help, ask for a referral or two, someone they know who may be willing to talk with you. Most people will be happy to give you a referral, and you will have another name for your contact list. Whether they say yes, maybe, or no, be sure to write them a short thank-you note afterwards. These notes go a long way. And don't forget to add every one of these people to your mailing list.

Once you've looked at a few spaces and selected the best one, it's time to go back for the final round of negotiations. Trade those tickets or benefit performance, offer a free ad in your program, and get the entire agreement in writing. Send every other company that offered space a short note, tell them you selected someone else, and thank them for their help.

Move In and Tell the World

Go ahead then and build your storage system, move your materials, get it all organized, and take some more pictures--the "after" shots. (By the way, you can use the same networking ideas listed above for help with the actual move.)

Now that you have your space, let the world know what you've accomplished. You either can write a press release or simply pick up the phone and call the local newspaper. Better yet, do some more networking: ask your contacts if they know someone at the paper or a TV station, and if they'd be willing to introduce you.

When you've found an interested reporter, call the company that donated the space and tell them about the press coverage. It's common courtesy. They also may (or may not) want to be interviewed.

During the interview, talk about why you need new space, what you plan to do with the old space, and about the company in general. Show the "before and after" pictures or take the reporter on a tour. People love to read this type of story: it's a refreshing change from wars and disasters. Make sure to add the reporter to your mailing list.

So, you've gotten new storage space, lots of new contacts, and free publicity. When you're ready to advertise your next production, call some of your contacts and ask if you can put up a poster at their location. If you made a good impression, they'll be happy to let you do so, and may even buy tickets!

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