



NPAC CONFERENCE RELEASE

Contact: Mark Shugoll

markshugoll@shugollresearch.com; (301) 656-0310 ext. 102

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE TO CONFERENCE ATTENDERS

June 11, 2008

RESEARCH STUDY FINDS THAT ATTENDING THE THEATRE NOT "ON THE RADAR SCREEN" FOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

***** While few high school students choose to attend on their own, many have been to the theatre with their parents or schools, and some have positive perceptions of going to the theatre, suggesting they could be converted to attenders if their needs are met *****

Why the Research Is Important

Audiences at non-profit theatres across the country tend to be older and theatres are interested in diversifying their audiences by age. High school students are one segment rarely represented in theatre audiences, and when they are they usually attend with parents or school groups. This study begins to examine the obstacles to theatre attendance among high school students and strategies to overcome them. It addresses the need for the non-profit theatre community to create the audiences of tomorrow. Future studies may examine the theatregoing habits of college students and those under age 35, additional segments that non-profit theatres would like to attract in greater numbers.

Study Highlights

Shugoll Research (Bethesda, MD) completed four focus groups with high school juniors and seniors where students repeatedly stressed that going to the theatre with their friends was not an activity they normally consider. Theatre is something they do occasionally with their parents or on a formal school trip, but not something they believe would be fun to do with their friends. Even if they wanted to go, they have little awareness of non-profit theatres in their area and typically cannot name what plays are running at these theatres (the only titles they can name are commercial productions like *Wicked* and *Jersey Boys*). These results highlight a study just completed for Theatre Communications Group (TCG) (New York), the national organization for the professional not-for-profit American theatre. TCG plans to conduct a quantitative study to build on these qualitative results next year.

How the Research Was Conducted

The focus groups were conducted in April 2008 in Chicago and Washington, DC, cities selected for their large number of non-profit theatres located both downtown and in the suburbs (so lack of availability of theatre wasn't an issue in not attending). In each city, one focus group was conducted with arts engaged students (those who participate in school activities such as theatre, orchestra, band, chorus, and advanced art classes). These students were considered the "low hanging fruit," those who, it was thought, might have the most interest in attending theatre. A second group was held in each city with non-arts engaged students. Other than a slightly higher

awareness of theatres and plays currently running, there were surprisingly few differences for the two types of students or across the two cities.

Encouraging Findings

Some students who have attended theatre with their parents and schools say they enjoyed the experience. Of those who have not been to the theatre recently, some would like to try it. Thus, there is a segment of young people who potentially could be converted into theatre attenders if some of their concerns are addressed. The biggest concern about attending is price. So another positive is that many non-profit theatres have addressed this issue by creating discounted student pricing. However, theatres have not found a way to reach students with the message that they have special pricing, thus high school kids cannot act on their interest in attending.

Going to the Theatre Is Not Something Students Consider Doing For Fun

When asked what they do for fun, students provide a long list of activities. None of the students across the four focus groups mentioned going to the theatre. Theatre is not on their radar screen or in their decision set. In fact, if they wanted to go, they typically can't name more than one non-profit theatre in their town and they do not know the plays currently running. Teenagers seek activities that are fun, but also activities where there are a lot of kids their age, some of whom they know and others whom they can meet. They are very spontaneous in deciding what to do for fun, often deciding the same day or even at the last minute. The only things they plan in advance are big events like concerts by their favorite artists.

Perceptions of Theatre

Some students have positive images of attending the theatre and think of it as exciting and special. These students say they would go if it wasn't for the price, including some students who have not attended before but would be willing to try it. The first image students have of theatre is that it is expensive. Dominant negative images are that performances can be long and boring (and you have to sit still and pay attention, not eat or talk like they feel you can at the movies), theatre is for old people (who usually are rich and white), theatre is not "cool," and theatre is something you do with your parents or a formal school trip (most look forward to these trips because it is a day out of school).

Perceived Obstacles to Attending

The major reason high school students say they don't go to the theatre is the cost of tickets (yet they spend high prices to go to things they truly like such as concerts). They are completely unaware that most non-profit theatres offer reasonably priced student tickets. Given the price, they also say they don't want to possibly waste their money on something they may not like. For movies, with previews shown in the theatres and constantly on television, and all their friends talking about the same films, they know exactly what they will get. In theatre, they have no idea of the plot, don't know whether a play is a comedy, drama, or musical, and don't recognize any of the actors. They don't seem to want to take risks when it comes to film or theatre. Because of the price, they see theatre as something to do on a "special occasion."

Students don't know what is playing in live theatres because they tend not to read the newspaper's arts section (where much theatre advertising takes place), don't read theatre reviews, and can't name area theatres or find their websites. Students say finding out what is at a theatre takes research, but they always know what movies are playing.

Another reason students don't want to attend theatre is that they think many plays are not engaging. They say they can't relate to most plots in plays. Some would like plays about people their age, or at least about events they can relate to.

A fascinating finding is that students say they don't have the patience to sit through a play. They are used to multi-tasking (they text while at the movies, talk to their friends, eat, even get up and walk around). They realize they can't do these things at the theatre. They describe their generation as an "ADD (Attention Deficit Disorder)" generation, not in a clinical sense but to describe their impatience with sitting still. This finding may be of concern to those in the industry who feel that many adults (especially those who are exposed to theatre when they are young) will begin going to the theatre when they are 40-50 years old (since they have more disposable income, their children are growing up and can stay home alone or are out of the house, and their peers are going). Our society will only offer more and more distractions as electronic and wireless media go in directions we can't even imagine now. Is it possible that this "ADD generation" will never develop the attention span needed to go to the theatre?

Other obstacles to attending the theatre include that they perceive they won't find other young people there (it isn't viewed as an appropriate social scene for them), they don't think their friends would enjoy going, it takes too much planning because they feel plays usually sell out and you can't just walk up and buy a ticket like at most movies, you have to dress up, there are only a few plays available unlike movies (students have no idea of the number of theatre offerings that are available in their cities), there typically is only one performance a day (unlike movies), locations are far away and usually downtown, musicals don't feature the type of music they like, and there is nothing besides the play itself (no pre-show tailgating, no after-parties).

Strategies and Solutions

Since students often feel theatre is not engaging, it is important to understand what might engage them. Many want plays about people they can relate to, including people their own age. Comedy is a genre they favor along with action oriented plots (although they are dubious the special effects they like in movies could be shown live on stage). Many want stories set in contemporary times.

With an understanding of the obstacles students cite in attending the theatre, it is possible to develop strategies to increase student attendance. Theatres likely would have the most success promoting any of their plays that have young characters experiencing things that students could relate to. Theatres must offer special pricing (probably from \$10 to \$20) and communicate much better that discounted student tickets are available. They can't wait for students to come to their website or call to inquire about special pricing. They will not do this because going to the theatre is not top of mind for them and they can't even name non-profit theatres to contact. Promotion of student tickets must be in places students go to and will see.

Developing relationships with high schools is one strategy to increase theatres' visibility and the awareness of student discounts. Schools may need to be convinced that they should cooperate with what they first may view as a commercial enterprise. It may be possible to overcome this by communicating with schools and school systems that theatres offer something schools need: access to the arts since it so often is being cut out of school curricula and since studies show arts involvement creates more well rounded students who often perform better academically. If a relationship can be established, theatres could distribute coupons to schools to be handed out to students that contain information on pricing, plot, dates, and times (getting something into a student's hands is preferable to signage in schools). Alternatively, theatres could distribute posters or other signage, perhaps working with drama teachers, or advertise in high school newspapers. They might even have actors make school appearances or have drama departments perform an

excerpt from the play running at a non-profit theatre (assuming rights and union regulations are followed).

Another strategy is to use student influencers employing online media (*Facebook, My Space, YouTube*) to network for a theatre. If concerns of unions can be overcome, theatres might create their own previews or coming attractions of their shows on videotape, which the student influencers could promote online. It is unlikely theatres will have the resources to run these previews on television or in movie theatres without some type of sponsorship relationship.

Since students enjoy the social aspect of being together, theatres might designate some performances as student performances. This might just be one performance in the run of a suitably engaging play. For this special performance, the theatre might have a pre-show pizza party and an after-party with a DJ and cast appearances. They might also have giveaways to students in attendance. Public sales to this performance should be cut off so adults are not in the house with an audience of high school students.

For regular performances in theatres that typically have excess ticket inventory, they might need to communicate that tickets are available at the last minute (since students are spontaneous in their social planning).

Since theatres can jointly benefit from having more students in the audience, collaborative projects (perhaps in tandem with a local League representing theatres) might be possible. Creating a common website with information targeted at students from all area theatres is one idea. It would be necessary to promote the site aggressively for students to become aware of it.

Study Underwriters

Shugoll Research is the leading arts and entertainment marketing research company in the U.S. Its clients include many non-profit theatres, opera companies, symphonies, dance companies, choral groups, performing arts centers, and service organizations and associations all across the country. For additional information on Shugoll Research and its services, stop by its booth at NPAC or please visit www.shugollresearch.com.

Theatre Communications Group (TCG) , the national organization for the professional not-for-profit American theatre, offers a wide array of services in line with its mission: to strengthen, nurture and promote the professional not-for-profit American theatre. It has over 470 member theatres and 17,000 individual members. For more information on TCG and its programs, please visit www.tcg.org.