

New way to run the show

By Jennifer Heldt Powell / Small Business Matters

Compared to live theater, movies are cheap and staying home to watch television is even cheaper. Tough economic times combined with changing entertain options have driven down theater attendance.

That's a tough reality when you run a theater company.

It calls for creative thinking and new, more business-like approaches such as those being employed at the Boston Children's Theatre.



Boston Children's Theatre birthday party instructor Sophie Bell, right, describes an activity to six-year-old partygoers, from left, Madeline Malloy, Kaylee Little and Lilianna Palmer. - Photo by Matthew Healey

“We are looking to put Boston Children's Theatre on the map as one of the major children's theaters in the country,” said Toby Schine, the company's executive producer.

The theater company was founded 60 years ago at a time when live shows were the dominant form of entertainment. It flourished into the 1970s and '80s and then faded from the forefront of the city's theater scene and became antiquated and outdated.

That started to change a few years ago when the board decided to rebuild the theater's reputation. They've been going about it much as any small business would, starting with a business plan.

“It’s a shift we’ve seen strongly in the last 20 years with nonprofits,” Schine said. “They’re a service industry and they’re looking at themselves as a business being able to sell a product.”

The theater company found that it had strengths to build on, starting with the name. Many people have either heard of it or at least they think they should have so they’re open to hearing more.

Additionally, while television takes some of the blame for the declining interest in theater, it has become part of the renaissance with shows such as “Glee” and “American Idol” that have sparked a renewed interest in performing.

The theater company is poised to take advantage of that interest with an abundance of new classes. It offered 120 last fall compared to just 30 in 2008. There’s a robust summer program with classes for ages from 4 to 19.

Then there is the premise that if you want to sell more, you have to make more.

Last year, Boston Children’s Theatre produced five shows compared to just three in the previous year. Each one is geared toward a slightly different age group.

Along with the increased number of shows, the theater company developed a school curriculum around them to get schools more involved. This allows it to reach out to the community while increasing its potential audience.

It worked. Last year, the audience included 10,000 students compared to just 600 in the previous year. The lineup this spring has some big names including “Lilly’s Purple Plastic Purse,” “A Year With Frog and Toad” and “To Kill a Mockingbird.”

Behind the scenes, the theater company upgraded its technology, added social media outreach and is redeveloping its Web site. It also added an unconventional service — birthday parties.

Though at first glance it may seem odd for a theater to offer parties, they actually fit the mission quite well. The parties are based around live stage performances. Instead of regular party games, the participants do acting exercises. The company already had the space, the costumes and the staff to provide the entertainment. All it needed was the cake and pizza.

“We get to introduce Boston Children’s Theatre to kids who wouldn’t otherwise come here,” Schine said.

The parties also bring in extra money, which helps fund other programs.

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