

IDENTIFYING AND CAPITALIZING ON BRAND IDENTITY

Case Study: Chicago Opera Theater

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Branding has become the marketing buzz word of the past few years. But branding is not something that will disappear when new marketing tactics come into practice to attract and retain customers. In fact, branding is not a tactic at all; it is an organizing principle so broad and so defining that it can shape and direct just about anything an organization does. The process of brand building should investigate every aspect of the organization, including all of its business practices. This does not mean that branding will interfere with the organization's mission or artistic vision. On the contrary: a thorough brand development and implementation process guarantees that the organization's mission and artistic vision will remain in clear focus and central to all activities.

Historical Overview: Chicago Opera Theater

Chicago Opera Theater (COT), founded in 1974, is a mid-sized opera company performing repertoire drawn from seventeenth, eighteenth, and twentieth century chamber operas. COT's mission is to provide first class productions of small to middle scale opera repertoire; to advance opera as a vital, living art form; to develop young artists; to expand and diversify its audience; and to be one of the best small opera companies in the country and an integral part of Chicago's cultural landscape. COT fulfills this mission through affordable tickets, unique repertoire, performances in intimate venues, and in-depth arts education and outreach programs.

An arts organization's brand identity is integral to and driven by its mission, which defines *who* is being served, *what* needs are being satisfied, and *how* needs are being met¹. However, in order to build a great brand, an organization must have a great product. Over much of its 30 year history, the quality of COT's productions was inconsistent, both resulting in and causing serious financial setbacks several times.

In 1999, COT underwent a major internal reorganization, resulting in the appointment of Brian Dickie as General Director. Mr. Dickie has more than 30 years experience in the opera field, including five years as General Director of the Canadian Opera Company and

seven years as General Director of the world-renowned Glyndebourne Festival Opera in England.

Since Mr. Dickie's arrival in Chicago, the quality of performances has been consistently high and COT has been enjoying rave reviews, including those from New York City critics who attended COT's production of *Orfeo* at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. Mr. Dickie has been named Chicagoan of the Year in the Arts in both 2000 and 2002 by the city's main newspaper, *The Chicago Tribune*. Audiences have been enthusiastic about the productions in the past three years, except for some complaints regarding supertitles.

For most of its existence, COT performed all operas in English. Since Mr. Dickie's arrival, operas have been performed in their original language, with supertitles for all foreign language operas. However, there have been complaints from patrons who do not understand "sung" English and feel their experience is far inferior to what it would be if supertitles were provided for operas in English as well. In fact, some patrons said they would not return to COT without supertitles for all operas, which have become the norm in the opera world as a whole and which are offered for all operas at the Lyric Opera of Chicago, which many COT patrons attend. Mr. Dickie is personally opposed to supertitles for English language operas, but willingly allowed questions about supertitles to be included as part of the brand identity research.

For most of its existence, COT has performed at the aging 960 seat Athenaeum Theatre, located in the heart of one of the city's near north neighborhoods and a significant distance, both physically and psychologically, from the downtown venues of the city's major cultural organizations. The Athenaeum, although charming, lacks important amenities such as handicap accessibility, convenient parking, entertainment lounges, and adequate bathroom facilities.

For more than a decade, several foundations and major donors in Chicago have been collaborating to raise adequate funds and build a much needed mid-sized venue in downtown Chicago to serve several local music and dance companies. Such a facility has been sorely lacking in this city where large and small halls abound but where mid-sized organizations have had to settle for performing in halls that are either too large, both for their offerings and their audience size; or outdated and poorly located like the Athenaeum. Some organizations have been forced to move from venue to venue for various productions during the season. Because patrons tend to identify an organization with its venue, it has been difficult for these organizations to develop a strong, clear brand identity. Over the years, costs of this new facility have greatly increased, creating more of a challenge for those dedicated to making it a reality.

Finally, in November 2003, construction will be completed on the 1,500 seat Music and Dance Theater Chicago (MADTC) and COT will have its first season of performances there beginning in February 2004. Although the move to this new, well located, state-of-the-art facility has been long anticipated, COT will incur dramatically increased rental costs in this new venue. As a result, COT needs to significantly build both its audience size and contributed income. To accomplish this, COT must build awareness of the organization, its offerings, and its new home among those unfamiliar with the

organization; it must build increased interest and involvement among infrequent attenders; and it must strive to build commitment and loyalty among subscribers and current donors.

COT enjoys a loyal and passionate if small audience. In recent years, the organization has done reasonably well selling subscriptions and single tickets to the five performances of each of the three operas it produces annually. Subscribers fill approximately 25% of the seats. Last season, Mozart's popular *Così fan tutte* played to sold out audiences, while Handel's little known *Semele* filled about 65% of the hall.

COT has always faced major competition from Chicago's Lyric Opera, one of the largest and finest opera companies in the world. However, COT has carved a strong and viable niche in performing smaller scale opera, typically by major composers, than what is performed in the Lyric's large venue. As a result, a significant percentage of Lyric patrons attend COT as well.

Steps in Brand Development

Brand awareness may be the traditional measure of brand strength, but brand relevance and brand resonance are far more valuable aspects of the branding package.² Says Scott Bedbury, author of "A New Brand World," "Top-of-mind awareness and other surface-level viewpoints of a brand reveal little about a brand's real strength or weakness. To fully understand a brand you have to look much deeper. You have to strip everything away and get to its core and understand how it is viewed and *felt* by people inside the company and the world outside."³ The overall goal is to create a brand image that is compelling in its creativity, relevance, and dynamism to various market segments. To build the brand, marketers must develop rich associations and promises for the brand name and manage all the customers' brand contacts so that they meet or exceed the customers' expectations associated with the brand.⁴

In the Spring of 2002, at the recommendation of a marketing consultant, COT management decided to undergo a brand identity analysis that would guide the organization in developing and implementing strategies to strengthen its brand presence in the Chicago area as well as to capitalize on the city-wide excitement over the new facility. Elements of results of this process were to be put in place for the 2003 season, running March through June in the Athenaeum Theater, in order to build a strong base for further growth in 2004.

Several goals were established for COT's image-identity development:

- Conduct a SWOT analysis of COT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats)
- Determine how to capitalize on the strengths and opportunities and which weaknesses can be and are worth upgrading
- Describe the current image of COT in the minds of current patrons, board members, and staff

- Determine which characteristics of the current image to retain and build; which to dispel
- Determine methods for building the desired image
- Develop and disseminate a clear, distinctive image for COT
- Identify and prioritize major current and prospective audience segments
- Develop and disseminate a positioning strategy for each of the targeted audience segments

Audience Survey

The first step of the analysis was to conduct an audience survey. Brand-building is more intuitive than analytical, but tools such as audience surveys can be invaluable in learning how patrons view the organization, its offerings, and those of its competitors. A well-designed survey can help the organization's managers determine which factors about the organization's offerings the patrons value, indicating effective positioning strategies; and what concerns patrons have, indicating possible changes and modifications. In order for a survey to be well designed, the managers and marketing researcher must carefully define the issues and agree on the research objectives.

A survey was inserted in the program book for all performances of COT's third opera of the 2002 season. Patrons were asked questions regarding their satisfaction with programming, artists, seating, scheduling, ticket price, the performance location, quality of the current venue, interest in the new venue, factors encouraging subscription, preferences regarding the use of supertitles, their information source for this performance, which other arts organizations they attend, and their personal demographic information. Responses from 753 patrons (21% of subscribers present; 19% of single ticket buyers) were tabulated and all personal comments were recorded.

Key findings included:

- *Age*: 61% of subscribers are age 55 or older; 36% of single ticket buyers are 55 or older. As is typical in the performing arts industry, there is a growing trend of decreased subscriptions among younger attenders.
- *Opera attendance*: 89% of the respondents attend the Lyric Opera; a great majority of them both subscribe and contribute. This huge cross-over audience makes it abundantly clear that COT appeals to opera lovers, and that many opera lovers are not satiated by their season of experiences at the Lyric Opera.
- *Supertitles*: 69% of respondents prefer that supertitles be offered for all productions; 19% say they should be offered sometimes; and 12% say supertitles should never be offered. In the personal comments on this issue, those in favor of supertitles were far more outspoken than those against, and several people reported that they would not return to COT without supertitles. This result indicated more than a preference for supertitles; it indicated a strong demand.
- *Comments regarding subscriptions*: A small percentage of people do not plan to renew their subscriptions because either they are not interested in all the productions, or there is too much competition for their leisure time or for their entertainment budget.

- *Comments regarding the forthcoming change in venue:* Some patrons report that they especially like the intimacy of the current venue and its neighborhood location; few complain about difficulty with parking at the current venue but many are concerned about ticket prices and parking fees in the new location; some people are waiting impatiently for the new venue to open; others enjoy the refined quality of the older atmosphere of the current venue. It is important to note here that only current patrons participated in the survey, so that those who do not like the location or amenities of the Athenaeum were by definition not included in the results.

Board of Directors and Staff Brainstorming Session

Once the results of the audience survey were tabulated, analyzed, and prepared for presentation, key members of the board and staff participated in a lengthy brainstorming session about the organization's image and identity. Those present included the board president, the chairperson of the marketing committee, the chairperson of the development committee, two other board members who are marketing professionals, the general director, the business manager, the marketing consultant who oversaw this process, and an arts management student from Northwestern University who administered the survey as a course project. (COT did not have a marketing director on staff at this point in time). The agenda of this session was to address perceptions of 1) COT, 2) its competition, 3) of opera in general, 4) of how participants viewed COT's audiences, 5) of COT's audiences' views of the organization and its offerings (based in the survey results). The analysis of these factors led the group to identify opportunities for building its image and identity, and therefore its earned and contributed income, among current and potential audiences.

Agenda

- Introductory discussion: How would you describe COT's current image? COT's audience.
- Northwestern student: Presentation of audience survey results
- Comparison: responses of the group present vs. those of survey respondents
- Discussion:
 - How is COT perceived now vs. desired image
 - Perceptions of opera in general
 - Perceptions of opera presented by COT
 - COT vs. Lyric Opera
 - Level of community awareness of COT
 - Lack of awareness of greatly improved quality over past 3 years
 - Ticket pricing perceptions
 - Location issues: how best to capitalize on move to MADTC
 - Audience demographics: issues regarding age, ethnicity, discretionary income, education, social preferences
 - Relative to other art forms: e.g.: visual arts, theater
- Marketing SWOT analysis (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats)

- Identify current and potential market segments

Results: Perceptions of opera in general

The participants in the brainstorming session employed a wide range of adjectives, both positive and negative, to describe opera in general. One may assume that these people drew their negative commentary from how they know or imagine others to feel about opera since, in their roles at COT, they are naturally dedicated to this art form. However, these negative descriptions may describe their honest opinions of opera in general and/or may reflect why these people are dedicated to COT, which may not be subject to such description.

- | | |
|------------------|-------------------------------|
| • Intimidating | • Exciting/thrilling |
| • Snobby | • Challenging |
| • Difficult | • Tuneful |
| • Long | • Dramatic |
| • Expensive | • Romantic |
| • Absurd | • Socially rewarding (status) |
| • Elitist | • Visually stimulating |
| • For old people | • Glamorous |
| • Impersonal | • Complex |
| • Stimulating | |

Results: Participants' views of COT

It is clear from the descriptions below that participants have not only an exclusively positive, but an enthusiastic view of the experience of attending opera at COT.

- | | |
|-------------------------|---------------|
| • Exciting | • Adventurous |
| • Refreshing | • Theatrical |
| • Fresh and immediate | • Musical |
| • Intimate and personal | • Humorous |
| • Engaging | • Younger |
| • Creative | |

Results: Views of COT audience

Before being told the results of the audience survey, participants were asked to describe the COT audience. For the most part, group members compared their perception of the COT audience to that of the Lyric Opera.

- *Informal:* COT board and staff view the COT audience as more informal than the Lyric audience. This is primarily a function of the formality of the Lyric's venue and of its much higher pricing structure. People dress for COT as they would to attend local theater.
- *Knowledgeable:* COT audience members are viewed as far more knowledgeable than the average Lyric attender, who tends to prefer the "war horse" operas and is more superficial in appreciation. It is the more sophisticated Lyric attender who also attends COT.

- *Opinionated:* COT attenders are considered to be more opinionated about their interests and preferences than Lyric attenders. It is interesting to note that this may have been true until the Lyric recently announced some programming and scheduling changes for next season that have angered many patrons.
- *Younger mix:* The COT audience is viewed as much younger than the Lyric audience. COT board members and managers were surprised to hear that the audience survey showed that on average, the COT audience is the same age as Lyric attenders. (See survey results above).
- *Not as wealthy/ more middle class:* Although we do not have access to statistics regarding the income of Lyric audiences, it is clear from their published donations that they attract a far larger audience of wealthy and philanthropic patrons than COT.
- *Lyric attenders:* Most COT board members and managers estimated that 50 percent of COT's audience also attend the Lyric; several estimated somewhat higher. They were surprised to hear that in actuality, 89 percent of COT patrons attend the Lyric. This information became centrally important in later planning for positioning statements and attractive advertising media.

Results: Perceptions of COT versus Lyric Opera

Next, participants described the nature of the COT experience compared to that of attending operas at the Lyric. The resulting descriptions and comparisons below were extremely useful in developing positioning statements for attracting both Lyric attenders and people who are not opera aficionados.

COT:

- Unpredictable
- Adventurous
- Unique repertory
- Unfamiliar cast
- Hip, authentic, revelatory
- Intimate, engaging, theatrical
- Precious, smaller-scale
- Lower price: (lower perceived value or good value?)

Lyric Opera:

- Predictable
- Dependable
- Familiar repertory
- Famous name performers
- High social status value
- Plodding
- Distant view, therefore non-theatrical
- Expensive but good value for money

Results: COT Awareness Issues

Participants expressed concern that the quality of COT's productions was inconsistent for several years before Brian Dickie's arrival and that knowledge of the great improvement has not spread among the general public. The operas have received consistently fine reviews over the past three years, but there has been inadequate word of mouth to build a general "buzz" about COT's high quality, hip, engaging, theatrical productions. Furthermore, participants noted that COT receives little to no recognition from the 18-35 year old segment, a market segment that is important to nurture to create long term sustainability for the organization.

Opportunities: Music and Dance Theater positioning

Longstanding COT attenders have been basically satisfied with their experience at the Athenaeum. In the audience survey, some respondents expressed concern about possible increased ticket prices in the new venue and the necessity of paying for parking in what will no longer be a neighborhood venue. Most, however, were looking forward to the move.

Board and staff members delight in knowing the great potential for attracting new patrons to the new performance venue. Key factors they identified as motivators to attendance are:

- Centrally located downtown. This location provides greatly increased convenience and stature for most potential patrons.
- Larger hall that maintains intimacy important in former location
- New venue with modern amenities, facilities, comforts, and safety
- Parking: surplus of indoor parking spaces adjacent to the venue's lower lobby
- Public transportation easily accessible
- Restaurants nearby

Opportunities: Segmentation

The board and staff members identified several market segments that they considered viable opportunities for the 2003 season at the Athenaeum. The current plan was to develop audiences, especially subscribers, with the promise of offering them priority seating at MADTC in 2004.

- Lyric Opera audience
- Theater audiences, Chicago Symphony Orchestra, and Music of the Baroque audiences
- Arts aware public (18-35)
- General Public (36+)
- Arts tourists
- Geographic segmentation: people who live in the Athenaeum neighborhood, suburbanites from areas that have a high percentage of cultural attenders and that have been under-targeted by COT in the past.
- Group sales: continuing education groups, clubs, alumni groups, businesses
- People celebrating special occasions
- Students

Target segments identified for 2003 season:

Due to constraints in both financial and human resources, it was not possible for COT to target all the segments identified above with specific marketing efforts.

It was decided that the best opportunities for developing the audience would be among Lyric attenders and patrons of several of Chicago's theaters and music organizations.

Epilogue to Board/Staff Brainstorming Session

All the members of the board and staff present at this session participated enthusiastically. Their wide variety of experiences with the organization, the community, the competition, and with the marketing function brought many valuable perspectives to the process. The rich material gleaned from the combination of the audience survey and the brainstorming session was further analyzed and distilled by the marketing consultant in conjunction with the COT staff in developing materials to implement the chosen strategies.

Implementation of Brand Campaign

Given available resources, it was decided that the general public would be reached through continuation of traditional means such as newspaper advertisements, radio ads on Chicago's classical music station, and advertisements at select movie houses in the city and suburbs that show "artsy" films. A few posters would be distributed to small businesses in the Athenaeum's neighborhood. Group sales efforts would be made by box office personnel during their available time. The policy of half price tickets for students would be included in all advertising material, but efforts to work with local universities in developing collaborations that would result in attendance at COT performances would not be possible given current staffing levels.

Significant funds were earmarked for a full page ad in the Lyric Opera program book throughout their entire season and for direct mail of brochures to mailing lists obtained from the marketing managers of eight area performing arts organizations whose audiences were determined to match the profile of COT attenders.

Brian Dickie made the decision (with encouragement from marketing staff) to offer supertitles for all productions, so it was decided that the message "Projected English supertitles for every opera" would be featured in all marketing material.

An important element of a strong brand is to not only meet, but exceed customer expectations whenever possible. The telemarketing campaign for 2003 subscription renewals began before the decision to offer supertitles for all operas was made. Several patrons who had been phoned by telemarketers refused to purchase tickets for COT performances unless supertitles would be offered. Once the supertitles decision was finalized, these former patrons were phoned again with the news. They were delighted not only with the information that their dissatisfaction had been addressed, but with the personal attention they received.

Positioning statements

It is important to make clear to people the true nature of the experience they will have so that their expectations will not differ from reality. It is also important to present an emotional appeal. According to Bedbury, “The near-universal desire for greater personal freedom, and the more particular American quest for rugged individuality, are what we might call *cultural emotions*. . . Effective brand building requires making relevant and compelling connections to deeply rooted human emotions or profound cultural forces.”⁵

The following positioning statements, attitudes, and/or words were selected for emphasis with targeted segments:

Lyric Opera attenders

- Continuation of Chicago opera season: “When the Lyric’s curtain goes down, ours goes up.” This was to dispel concern that COT opera performances occur in the same time period as Lyric performances, making scheduling difficult and inundating people with the opera-going experience in a short time frame.
- “Rabid opera fans grieve when Lyric’s season is over, and no doubt they’re beginning to feel the same about COT,” quoted from Wynne Delacoma, music critic of a local newspaper.
- Express such concepts as: unique repertory, innovative, witty, intimate, theatrical, engaging, stimulating, discover

Although many Lyric attenders prefer the familiar, COT is attractive to those among them who are interested in adventuresome programming. The Lyric, with approximately 3,500 seats and 8-12 performances of each of 8 operas over the season has a huge audience base. COT, with a 900 seat hall and only 5 performances of 3 operas each season need only attract a small percentage of the Lyric’s audience to be successful in audience growth.

Theater and chamber music attenders

- Opera that’s real theater!
- Thrilling music; stunning theater
- Intimate, theatrical, engaging, stimulating
- Unique repertory

These words and phrases were used variously in season brochures, print advertisements, and on the wholly redesigned website.

Graphic Design

Design quality and consistency are crucial elements of any effective branding campaign. Previously, materials were designed in-house by the marketing director for budgetary reasons. Although an increase in the marketing budget did not accompany this brand campaign, it was decided that print ads could be reduced in size from what was planned and budgeted for without reducing their effectiveness and that this would free up adequate funds to hire a professional design consultant and incur associated printing costs. In the 2003 season, for the first time, each advertisement and direct mail piece was

professionally designed, followed the themes of the brand campaign, and ascertained design consistency. Email messages to patrons were also designed to be consistent with the colors and messages of the season, even though they were done in-house and with readily available fonts.

Promotional copy for each opera, including fonts and images, were designed to reflect the quality and nature of the COT experience as a whole and the nature of each opera. These images became readily recognizable to patrons, so that people who had seen a 12 second spot on the screen of the movie theater would recognize the same strong images and font styles in the newspaper advertisements and direct mail brochures and postcards.

Conclusion

The last week of March marked the opening of the 2003 season (and the final editing of this paper). Subscription renewals from long-standing subscribers were extremely high and exceeded goals set by the marketing department the previous year. A significant number of new subscribers had been garnered for the 2002 season, primarily through telemarketing, and a larger than typical number of these people did not renew. It is difficult to know if this is because of artistic reasons, because people recruited for the first time are not as likely to want to continue their relationship with the organization, (it is said that many people say “yes” to a telemarketer just get them off the phone), because of dramatic changes in people’s financial situation in the current economic climate, or because of lifestyle changes, or fears that resulted from September 11 that make people less interested in committing to an entire season in advance. The performing arts industry as a whole is experiencing significant reductions in subscriptions, and COT planned early in the season to be at the forefront of appealing to and meeting the needs of single ticket buyers.

To this end, COT began selling single tickets while the subscription campaign was still underway and long before others in the field are wont to do. COT also offered to single ticket buyers, for the first time, the right to exchange tickets to another performance of the same production for a small fee. Ticket exchanges have traditionally been offered as a subscriber benefit only. Many people took advantage of COT’s early single ticket sales. Due to a focus on customer relationship management in the age of high tech marketing, customers have become accustomed, in their daily lives, to getting exactly what they want, when they want it. It is important for COT to give their customers the same courtesy.

Many tickets remain to be sold to meet COT’s overall 2003 sales goals. More tickets than ever are being sold within days before the performances, even before reviews have been published. These last minute ticket sales are most welcome but not the most comfortable situation for COT marketing personnel.

To counter this trend, for the 2004 season, COT will take the bold step of creating a season brochure, rather than a subscription brochure, through which patrons may either subscribe or purchase tickets to the operas of their choice. This brochure will be mailed to target groups in the general public after the subscription renewal campaign is complete.

This strategy follows the principle that customers should be encouraged to buy whatever they so desire. Once COT has new and satisfied patrons, efforts can be made to upsell additional performances. This approach is far more sensitive to the patrons than policies that say, "If you don't subscribe, we don't want you until we are so close to performance dates that we do not expect to sell any more subscriptions and we will then take your money."

COT, under the strong, visionary leadership of Brian Dickie is reflecting its innovative, adventuresome, intimate artistic experience with its approach to customer relationship management, firmly integrating its brand identity throughout all aspects of the organization. Just as Chicago Opera Theater intends to confirm and expand its role as a leader in Chicago culture when it begins performances at the new state-of-the-art Music and Dance Theater Chicago in 2004, it will continue to deepen and refresh its brand identity as a marketing organization that is perpetually in touch with its customers.

¹ Kotler, Philip and Scheff, Joanne, "Standing Room Only: Strategies for Marketing the Performing Arts," Harvard Business School Press, 1997, p.52.

² Bedbury, Scott, "A New Brand World: 8 Principles for Achieving Brand leadership in the 21st Century," Viking 2002, p. xiii

³ Ibid., p. 21

⁴ Kotler, Philip, "Kotler on Marketing: How to Create, Win, and Dominate Markets," The Free Press, 1999, p. 55

⁵ Bedbury, p. 105