



**UPINTHEAIR THEATRE**  
Communications Analysis & Recommendations

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## PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

This report will primarily examine the current marketing and communications activities of the company, in order to assist the artistic directors, management and board in strategically planning marketing and communications activities and expenditures for the festival to come. Through the process of a core review of current marketing practices and an examination of trends, this report will attempt to suggest a course of action that will result in more efficient spending and budgeting, higher earned revenues, and increased profile, with a specific focus on the rEvolver Festival.

## BACKGROUND

Led by Daniel Martin and David Mott, Upintheair's major annual activity is the rEvolver Festival. rEvolver grew from the now defunct Neanderthal Festival, and focuses on presenting new work from international, national and regional theatre artists who self-identify as emerging or early career. A second important stream of activity is the creation of new work.

The company's mission is focused on the next generation of artists, the next wave of companies. Through its own productions, Upintheair focuses on exploring ideas about what is happening in the world right now, through an intelligent eye on the near future or alternate past. The rEvolver Festival presents new work by emerging artists with a focus on formal invention, expressed through experimentation in untried or risky content, issue or idea, writing style, genre, and staging.

The company's objectives and mandate with regard to marketing and communications initiatives are as follows:

- To create and capitalize on opportunities to develop audiences for the company's work in innovative and effective ways.
- To enhance the mission of Upintheair with strong branding and communications strategies.
- To utilize the existing capacity of the organization in the most efficient way.

Key stakeholders of Upintheair include:

- Founders Daniel Martin and David Mott
- Contract and project-based staff members
- Board of Directors
- Volunteers
- Funders, including The Canada Council for the Arts, The Department of Canadian Heritage (Federal Government), BC Arts Council (Provincial Government), City of Vancouver (Office of Cultural Affairs), corporate sponsors, and individual donors
- General public
- The wider global arts community

## **SWOT ANALYSIS**

### **Strengths**

Established track record of quality productions.

Strengthening identity as a presenter of original works.

Established funding history, currently receiving funding for the festival as well as individual projects.

The spirit of the organization is strong and positive.

Company is active part of a core community creating interesting work in Vancouver.

Success in expanding core activities beyond annual productions. Much work has been done to tighten the focus and messaging around the rEvolver Festival.

ADs have concrete and realistic goals for the company.

Supportive board of directors

### **Weaknesses**

Human resources are limited. Communications functions performed ad hoc by personnel with some time in their schedule.

Fragmented audiences. Ticket buyers come to a specific show or type of work, but do not support the whole festival.

Challenged to build core support—core audience that will come to all presentations, and repeat from year to year.

Long-term planning a challenge due to HR and funding issues.

Identity of company unclear to larger community; diversity of work is confusing to outsiders.

## **Opportunities**

Spring timeline for rEvolver takes it out of most companies' regular seasons, but not so far into the summer as to conflict with holiday travel and vacations.

Mentoring younger artistic personnel enhances the reputation of the company and introduces fresh blood to the organization.

The Cultch has indicated a willingness to provide more marketing and communications support.

Adding dedicated communications support will free up producers to focus on strategy, curation, and positioning of the festival locally and nationally.

## **Threats**

Vancouver's arts community is always at risk due to economic and development pressures. A company that specializes in emerging work faces particular challenges around tickets sales of "unknown quantities."

Future funding from all levels of government cannot be guaranteed.

Venue support varies from year to year--rentals are going up, bar minimums are unpredictable.

Cutting-edge or emerging work generally has a smaller audience than more well-known work; artists must work twice as hard to attract half as many audience members.

Young, price-sensitive audiences are more affected by economic fluctuations than more affluent audiences.

## STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEW FINDINGS

Community members interviewed on the whole felt that Upintheair was doing a good job with their communications strategies given the HR challenges that the company faces.

If any criticism was offered, it was that sometimes communication around the festival feels unfocused-- visuals and messaging don't match, the festival's intent is not well understood.

There was confusion about the difference between Upintheair and rEvolver.

There was unanimous support for rEvolver over Neanderthal. Every person surveyed mentioned that the communications were vastly more clear than Neanderthal. In the words of one interviewee--"it might not be clear what kind of arts event it is, but it's clearly an arts event."

The most effective piece of communication identified by insiders was email. Every one of the people who took the time to expand on their thoughts cited email as the most memorable, consistent, and well-timed method of communication currently employed. With this group of arts professionals, email ranked higher than Facebook, traditional media, Twitter, direct mail, or word-of-mouth as how they learned of the Festival.

One interviewee made the excellent point that email is by nature self-selecting. In her words, "If I read the email I get from everyone, I'd jump out a window." So, the fact that emails are being read and remembered is encouraging as the company seeks to streamline its communications activities.

The Festival may need some clearer messaging around its mandate, selection process, and curatorial vision. Even relative insiders didn't feel like they knew what the artistic vision encompassed. That doesn't mean that producers haven't thought about it—it just needs to be more "in your face."

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The only place there is any cost saving to be had is in brochure printing, maybe. Every other expense is fixed, very low, or in-kind. The festival does a lot with very, very little, as acknowledged by everyone I spoke to.

On a macro level, the festival needs a plan for growth. What are the next priorities? My suggestion would be, obviously, communications, as its activities need to take place at a time when producers are either hammering out production details or should be free to interact with colleagues, network with other presenters and artists, and assess their programming choices. Producers need to work out what the next priority is, and work towards it.

On a similar note—the festival needs to do a little strategic planning. One of the most valuable tools in evaluating marketing opportunities is the question, “Does this move our goals forward?” It’s difficult to leave things on the table, but if you have limited resources and personnel, you need to be selective with your activities. Knowing where you want to go is one way to filter opportunities as they arise.

Bluntly, saving the fee of a communications person and having one of the producers take care of the media and marketing? Penny-wise, but dollar-foolish. Nobody expects the producer of a festival to also control the main social media accounts and deal with the media. Dan has done as good a job as is humanly possible, and has left an amazing template for someone with more time for follow-up to pick up and run with.

A single festival image is more effective than two or more. That image will be up for debate every year, but a single image simplifies the design process and unifies the festival’s messaging. Same with tag lines—The Changing Stage is really strong. Abandon “Everything but the Kitchen Sink” and stay with that one.

Meet with the marketing people at the Cultch. For next year, you’ve got Nicole’s go-ahead to insist she be involved in early planning, and the ok to contact her directly if Jenn says no. (She feels that Jenn thinks she’s doing her a favour, but really, once the Cultch season is over, you are helping Nicole to keep in touch with her audience at a time when they have no programming.) Potential activities discussed include offers to their patrons, blog interviews with Dan/Dave, online features, information emails, etc.

Curatorial thoughts and findings: Think about a two-tiered presentation system? Partnered presentations with shared risks vs. straight up presentations? A mandatory marketing cost that could change—so, fee with no marketing participation is \$X (lower). Fee with a commitment to XYZ marketing activities is \$Y (higher).

Embed marketing expectations in contract. Minimum participation would be rEvolver logo on site and any collateral produced, Facebook invites to an event created by Upintheir, email invitations to company mailing list, retweets and shares on social media.

## AUDIENCE SEGMENTS

By breaking the audience into segments and tailoring a communications plan to each group, the company will be able to leverage the tools it has already invested in to communicate more effectively, raise funds, sell tickets, and engage its community.

What are these groups?

They can be roughly divided into the following segments. Individual audience members may straddle two categories, or move around in the pyramid, but in general, upward movement should be the focus of any communications, marketing and fundraising activities.



## SINGLE SHOW BUYERS, BRAND NEW

Who are they?

Audience members who are unknown to the company, and who purchase a ticket to a festival show. These audience members have either been brought by friends, know one of the presented companies, or read something in the media or social media and have taken the chance on buying a ticket. Identifying and speaking to this group is a critical step to moving them up the pyramid.

Tool kit for reaching them:

- Traditional media
- Word of mouth
- Partner communications vehicles
- Social Media

Advantages of this sector:

- Least jaded of all the audience sectors.
- A really great show can be life changing and mind altering for this group.
- Easiest to move up the pyramid at a low opportunity cost.
- Large group can hide future advocates—need to identify and communicate with all to find the gems
- Grows lists for future communications and smaller projects

Specific recommendations:

- Make sure database and ticketing are fully integrated. You need to know who buys your tickets.
- Develop a process or automated system for moving new contacts to database and email program.
- Work on specific, welcoming, inclusive language around your online ticketing. Imagine the customer is standing at a box office and speaking to a live human. Use language you'd want your staff to use.
- Engage a communications professional to reach the widest swath of media/bloggers possible.
- Of all activities, this is the one that warrants a buy in traditional media. A big net catches the most fish.
- Ensure partners and presented companies are in good communication around audience issues, ticketing, logistics, etc. Audience experience is paramount to successfully motivating first-timers to stick with rEvolver and try different offerings.
- Encourage board/staff/friends/close associates to spread the word to their own social networks in advance on the show.
- Make the above activities mandatory for presented companies
- Word of mouth can happen via mouth, but is also likely to take place on the internet. Bump up your Twitter presence (use a utility like Hootsuite, appoint someone the designated tweeter, make sure they have access to real-time tweets on their phone while the show is up, so they can thank people, retweet good reviews, and respond to issues as they arise), interact with people on Facebook (don't just make an event and run), and set up Google Alerts to monitor blog traffic and comments.

## MULTIPLE SHOW OR REPEAT TICKET BUYERS

Who are they?

In many ways, this is the bulk of the current audience, but it is the least homogenous. Some attend shows that receive lots of buzz, some avoid those shows and focus on the aspects that have personal appeal. This group is the least consistent, and hardest to predict.

Tool kit for reaching them:

- Traditional marketing and media
- Word of mouth
- Social Media
- Direct communication via email

Advantages of this sector:

- Wide ranging—some segment of the audience will like something about what you're doing, regardless.
- Untapped resource for targeted communications—currently everyone gets everything.
- By observing ticket purchasing history and behaviour, can direct them to shows and events they will find appealing.
- Familiar with the company and its work. Makes communicating what a show is all about easier.

Specific recommendations:

- Work on refining your email subject lines. Even if someone fails to open your email, they'll see the subject line.
- Examine your marketing mix on a case-by-case basis. Capacity should determine actions. Mainstream media and advertising may be the most efficient way to reach this group, but try to build a plan that allows more low-cost options to roll out first.
- Consider developing a vehicle to talk to this group when you're NOT producing a show. A friendly letter/newsletter (even in electronic format) to keep in touch and keep them engaged.
- Partner with like-minded organizations. Partners might include bookstores, independent movie theatres, outdoor or bike stores, fancy grocery stores, etc. Think outside the performing arts for opportunities to spread the reciprocal word.
- Develop attractive offers for this group to move them up the pyramid, and personalize those offers using information from the database. For example, an email to everyone who attended more than one show last year, offering them a special deal on a pass this year, referencing their past history.
- Develop a reporting system to let you know when someone reaches an agreed upon ticket threshold (3 in 2 years?), to automatically add them to the donation/pass deal/special people prospecting list.

## PASS PURCHASERS

Who are they?

This is the most committed group. They have declared that they like what Upintheair does; it's a priority for them to attend; and they're happy to commit to multiple performances, in advance.

Tool kit for reaching them:

- Direct communication via email
- Direct communication via traditional printed pieces or mail
- Social Media

Advantages of this sector:

- Your most powerful community advocates
- Untapped resource for targeted communications—currently everyone gets everything.
- Most likely group to make personal pledges or connect personnel to potential sponsors.
- Familiar with the company, active fans of its mandate. This group would respond to an exhortation to spread the word, because they want rEvolver to succeed.

Specific recommendations:

- This is a situation where a large, mass campaign will likely not get the results you need at a cost you can absorb. Focus on growing this group with direct communication to multiple single ticket buyers, rather than newspaper advertising.
- Examine your marketing mix on a case-by-case basis. Capacity should determine actions. Roll out your lowest-cost options first.
- This group requires some “special” communication. Personal letters signed by Dave and Dan, direct emails, rather than bulk newsletters, advance notice of upcoming plans, first crack at seats for shows, etc. will keep them loyal and move them up the pyramid.
- Make sure the database is up to date re: ticketing history—this is your best group to approach about donations, but accurate information is essential to avoid offending/upsetting.

**CHECKLIST: FESTIVAL COMMUNICATIONS CAMPAIGN**

Date	Task	Done by	Completed
16 Weeks Out	Solicit project descriptions from participating companies		
	Meet with media sponsor to discuss plans		
	Meet with venue to discuss opportunities for support		
12 Weeks Out	Project description Written		
	Website Updated		
	Marketing budget agreed upon		
7 Weeks Out	Press release written		
	Website Updated		
	Creative brief agreed upon		
	Materials to designer		
6 Weeks Out	Blog post x 1		
	Twitter x 3 posts		
	Facebook Events created (1x per show)		
	Press release sent		
	First draft, poster/other collateral		
	Monitor and respond to social media traffic		
5 Weeks Out	Poster/cards to printer		
	Partnership initiatives agreed upon		
	Blog post x 2		
	Twitter x 5		
	Monitor and respond to social media traffic		
	Facebook invitations		

4 Weeks Out	Press follow up		
	Blog post x 2		
	Twitter x 5		
	Facebook		
	Collateral sent out for distro		
	Ads begin this week		
	Monitor and respond to social media traffic		
3 Weeks Out	Media photography posted to web		
	Blog post x 3		
	Twitter x 10		
	Facebook		
	Special offers planned		
	Media interviews/print (usually)		
	Ads continue, update as necessary		
	Monitor and respond to social media traffic		
2 Weeks Out	Special offers activated (Facebook friends, professional group discounts, email promotions, etc.)		
	Email to mail list		
	Blog post x 3		
	Twitter x 10		
	Facebook		
	Ads continue, update as necessary		
	Monitor and respond to social media traffic		

1 Week Out	Email to mail list		
	Top up collateral		
	Photo release to media		
	Blog post x 3		
	Twitter x 10		
	Facebook		
	Ads continue, update as necessary		
Week of Festival	Blog as often as possible		
	Twitter as often as possible		
	Facebook as often as possible		
	Media clippings		
	Radio/TV for artist		
	Last minute offers		
	In-theatre promos ready.		
Post-show (no later than 2 weeks)	Identify and welcome new audience members		
	Thank sponsors/partners		
	If appropriate, fundraising message to multiple single ticket holders.		

## MARKETING CHECKLIST

Presented Companies could commit to all or a selection of the following:

### FREE:

- Facebook invitations (Upintheair creates the events)
- Emails to mailing lists (agreed upon content—Upintheair to proof final draft)
- Press release about the specific show (Upintheair to proof, must include rEvolver logo)
- Tweets with agreed upon hashtag (#rEvolver?)
- Consistent retweets and shares on social media
- Blog posts about rEvolver and the show
- Cooperation with media (reasonable availability for interviews, open and forthcoming about any fans in the media)

### PAID:

- Jointly produced show specific card or flyer