

# Local Theater Attendance: A Scientific Approach to Audience Recruitment

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*ABSTRACT: The purpose of this research was to develop an understanding of why the Contemporary Theatre of Syracuse (CTS) audience members attend performances and subscribe as season ticket holders. The knowledge gained about these motivations was sought for the ultimate purpose of enabling CTS to develop messages for audience recruitment. CTS attendees ranked a Q sample of 45 statements representing diverse motivational grounds for supporting CTS, and three factors were found. For each of the factors, suggested themes for recruitment messages appropriate to the target group are discussed.*

## Introduction

The Contemporary Theatre of Syracuse (CTS) is a not-for-profit independent theater company that has been part of the Syracuse, New York community since 1979. Typically, CTS fills about two-thirds of its 90-seat capacity for each performance. At the time of this research CTS sought to build its subscriber base (then at 130) and through a review of theater literature determined that new subscribers would most

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likely be individuals who have attended at least one performance or have some familiarity with CTS. So while the goal was ultimately to increase CTS's subscriber base, the immediate objective was to attract more people to performances, since the best source of subscribers are people who already have an affinity for CTS (i.e., attend performances).

This research addressed the question: Why do current subscribers or attendees subscribe to or attend CTS performances? Advancing an understanding of what leads people to attend will enable CTS to incorporate these themes into recruitment messages for mass communications tools. The expected result is that the use of these messages will enable CTS to attract larger audiences and eventually season ticket holders—a condition necessary for the theater's survival.

Utilizing Q methodology, our research allowed participants to prioritize or focus their reasons for attending or subscribing—a valuable aid in the development of messages for advertising, direct mail and other communications vehicles used for audience recruitment. Q methodology has been used before to successfully focus messages for communication campaigns (Kinsey, 1991).

### **Review of Related Research**

In developing the discourse of statements for this Q study, it was important to consider the theater management literature in order to understand what motivates individuals to attend or subscribe to theater. Themes examined by this body of literature included: the need for developing subscribers and attendees, strategies for motivating the public to attend, and techniques for ascertaining attendance patterns for the performing arts.

As noted, our goal in this research is to learn what motivates CTS's most loyal patrons to attend performances. Getting to the core of motivations for attending theater, as explained by Stephen Langley, is what will "convert potential customers into paying customers" (1980, p. 332). If CTS wants to attract additional attendees to their performances, they must understand the theater's appeal to those who already attend. The most direct way to understand this appeal was to study those who subscribe and/or attend, the strategy chosen for this research project.

Mitchell (1984) surveyed 902 subjects representing four lifestyle types that were expected to be the core groups that would support

"most styles of live music, theater and dance" (p. 4). Mitchell discovered that increasing attendance among people who already frequently attended theater was fostered in particular by offering bigger discounts on season tickets. His respondents also valued the ability to make reservations by telephone, meet the performers in person, attend weekend performances, enjoy uncrowded theaters, and arrange for other social occasions associated with the performances (Mitchell, 1984).

Advertising has been recognized by theaters (both amateur and professional) as an effective means for drawing audiences. However, because of the expense involved, messages must be well thought out, appropriately targeted to audiences and tested for efficacy. This further reinforces the appropriateness of Q methodology as a tool in designing effective messages for potential CTS supporters.

According to Langley (1980), in *Theater Management in America*, "Advertising is expensive ... yet a majority of theaters appear to exert little effort and less imagination when it comes to planning an advertising campaign.... No less time and thought should go into advertising design than goes into scene design" (p. 361).

In Cleveland, a group of small theaters transformed the theater scene by bringing new, provocative and off-beat plays to the area. Key to attracting a loyal audience has been their ability to develop a rapport with prospective attendees through advertising. One facet of this success, according to Evett (1995), has been carefully tailored communications on the part of theater officials seeking to inform consumers and thereby develop trust while building audience size.

But if advertising is to be used to attract attendees, it must incorporate new reasons (via messages) that will motivate people to come. "Once promotional subject matter has captured attention, it must go a second step and motivate the reader ... to buy tickets or follow whatever other course is advocated ..." (Langley, 1980, p. 332).

*The Foundation for the Extension and Development of the American Professional Theater* placed a great deal of importance on developing a subscription audience. "The weight of evidence indicates that for a theater whose goal is permanence, to operate on a non-subscription basis is suicidal" (1977, p. 5). The foundation cited the case of Arena Stage in Washington, D.C. as evidence of the significance of subscription sales. At the time of publication, Arena Stage had been organizing its audience on a subscription basis. It remains committed to the process and has a guaranteed pre-sold capacity of fifty percent for its

larger theater and sells sixty-six percent of its seats in its smaller theater through its subscription program. Almost twenty years have passed since that analysis, and Arena Stage continues to thrive as one of the preeminent theaters in the Mid-Atlantic region.

Because CTS is a non-profit theater company and subscription and attendance efforts are closely linked to fundraising, the fundraising literature was also examined to reveal motivational themes. The fundraising literature for non-profit organizations provides ample guidance and justification for using direct mail as a strategy to increase attendance and season subscriptions through the use of motivational messages. Joseph Mixer (1993), for example, argues that "fundraising benefits from such elements of strategic management as organizational vision, environmental awareness ... and execution of strategic activities to achieve success" (p. 146). Hence any successful fundraising effort (such as increasing revenues through expanded sales of tickets and season subscriptions) needs to be approached strategically. Learning about CTS's own fundraising target—its attendees—was therefore essential before committing money to designing, printing or mailing a direct mail package.

One of the fundamentals of successful fundraising is cultivating donors. "Cultivation is the process of gaining the prospect's attention, winning this person's active interest, and culminating in his or her partnership through sharing of time and resources" (Pendleton, 1981, p. 96). Subscribers and attendees need to be "cultivated" just like donors. One of the primary cultivation media recommended by Pendleton is printed information. The advantage of printed information is its relative staying power—as opposed, for instance, to a radio message that is over in seconds and cannot be listened to at a person's convenience. A direct mail solicitation may be read at the recipient's convenience and contains all the materials necessary (information, response device and reply envelope) to permit the recipient to subscribe in response.

Once new subscribers have purchased season tickets, it is very likely they will do so again. Renewal rates for persons who purchase season tickets range in the vicinity of 66 percent (Klein, 1991). Direct mail is therefore a method to increase revenue through subscription sales and thereby build up a loyal audience.

## Methodology

Nominal Group Technique (NGT) was used to develop the concourse of statements to be used in the Q study. According to Kinsey and Kelley (1989), NGT is a process "which allows a group of people to generate a vast number of ideas in a quick and amicable way" (p. 99). Ten participants were randomly selected from subscriber and attendee lists and recruited by the research team to attend a NGT session.

Statements were collected through the NGT by asking participants to answer the question: *What motivates you to subscribe to or attend CTS?* That session generated 37 statements for the Q sample. An additional eight statements were generated from both CTS promotional materials and the literature on theater management, producing a total of 45 statements in the Q sample. The statements in the Q sample were grouped into six categories of concern that reflected possible motivations for attending. Specifically the categories reflected concerns with artistic quality along with a series of "collateral" considerations bearing on diverse motivations of individual attendees: artistic quality, intellectual, philanthropic, self-interest, theater-specific and community. Each category was represented by between six and ten statements in order to ensure a roughly balanced Q sample.

The participants, drawn from a list of current CTS subscribers and attendees, were asked to sort the statements so as to represent their reasons for attending or subscribing to CTS. The sorting consisted of participants ranking these statements from -5 to +5, with a -5 ranking for the statements that least represented participants' reasons for attending or subscribing and a +5 ranking for statements that most represented participants' reasons for attending or subscribing.<sup>1</sup>

## Findings

Q sorts were correlated and factor analyzed via the centroid method using Stricklin's (1995) PCQ program. Three meaningful factors were extracted and rotated by varimax criteria to a position approximating simple structure. Loadings by all the respondents on all three factors are shown in Table 1.

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<sup>1</sup>The forced-choice format for Q sorts dictated the following number of items be assigned to each of the 11 value categories from -5 to +5: 2, 3, 4, 5, 5, 7, 5, 5, 4, 3, 2.

**Table 1**  
**Rotated Factor Matrix**

Subjects	Factor Loadings		
	Factor A	Factor B	Factor C
1	<b>49</b>	-32	11
2	<b>90</b>	25	-04
3	<b>55</b>	17	-04
4	<b>38</b>	<b>55</b>	-20
5	00	<b>70</b>	11
6	<b>38</b>	02	<b>49</b>
7	10	12	-32
8	<b>65</b>	19	14
9	14	11	<b>49</b>
10	<b>54</b>	-21	25

Decimals omitted. Loadings  $\geq \pm .38$  are significant ( $p < .01$ ) and shown in bold-faced type.

Five of the 10 participants were purely loaded on factor A; two were purely loaded on factor B; and two were purely loaded on factor C. Only one respondent did not load significantly on any factor. These factors were substantially orthogonal, as indicated in Table 2.

**Table 2**  
**Factor Correlations**

	Factor A	Factor B	Factor C
Factor A	—	.15	.18
Factor B		—	.16
Factor C			—

### **Factor A: Theater Purists**

Factor A members may be considered "theater purists." This group gave high ranking to statements that emphasized particular aesthetic qualities of performances. For those on factor A, it seems that theater is an end in itself. Among the statements gaining strong endorsement by factor A are the following:

I enjoy the performances ... I want to be part of a cutting edge theater company ... I am happy with the artistic quality of CTS plays ... It is a way to support and maintain a connection to the arts community ... I enjoy the stage sets and lighting ... I support community theater in general.

This group does not seem motivated by a desire for a social outlet. They also did not cite CTS's involvement in the other community not-for-profit organizations as important. They ranked the statement "CTS generates an awareness of important community issues" on the negative end of the scale. Factor A members value theater, but unlike those on factor B, theater is seen *not* as an "entertainment choice", but rather as an *art form*. (Factor scores for all statements on each factor are contained in the Appendix.)

### ***Factor B: Entertainment of Choice***

Attendees and subscribers who belong to factor B see theater as their "entertainment of choice." They also view CTS as an important social opportunity. Theater is fun for them, and they may have participated in theater themselves. They like theater and may choose theater over other entertainment options such as movies, sporting events or hobbies. While these people enjoy theater, they are not necessarily loyal to CTS. They may be just as likely to attend another local theater, for example, as they would a CTS performance. The "social-entertainment" flavor of factor B's views can be seen in the following statements drawn from the positive end of the factor B array:

CTS plays are a form of culture ... I did community theater myself ...  
 Subscribing makes it easier to plan ahead to do an activity ... It gets me  
 out of an entertainment rut ... I want to belong to and support a  
 community-based group.

This group does not find CTS's support of other local not-for-profit organizations as part of its appeal. They are also unlikely to place much emphasis on the aesthetic details or nuances in artistic interpretation. For example, the statements "Shows benefit local causes" and "I enjoy the stage sets and lighting" receive negative scores by factor B. Because this audience is not loyal to CTS, but does appreciate theater as an entertainment option, the quality of CTS productions and the credibility of the theater company will be very important.

***Factor C: Intellectually Stimulated***

Attendees and subscribers on factor C enjoy the intellectual stimulation of the subject matter and value the contemporary components of CTS. They enjoy being challenged by the plays that CTS offers, and seem to value CTS's unique offerings to the Syracuse theater community. The following statements are found at the positive end of the factor C array:

It is an opportunity to see plays by living and emerging playwrights ...  
CTS plays cover controversial topics ... The plays reflect contemporary issues ... The plays evoke multiple levels of interpretation ... The plays are thought-provoking works.

Interestingly, factor C gave the statement "I like live theater" a neutral ranking of 0, in contrast with factors A and B which ranked this statement +5 and +3 respectively. Similarly low rankings were given to statements such as "I did community theater myself," "Subscribing ensures I won't be locked out of popular shows," and "I am familiar with an actor playwright or director and want to see their work again". Factor C participants do not exhibit a personal connection to theater in general as they gave a low ranking to statements describing participation in community theater and personal connection to a director or actor in a show.

Contrasting the positive with the negative rankings of factor C, one can posit that those loading on this factor are not attending CTS on the basis on their love of theater or for the aesthetically pleasing qualities of CTS theater as an entertainment option of choice. These individuals attend CTS for the intellectual stimulation associated with the subject matter as discussed.

***Consensus Items***

It is important when considering broad-based messages for mass communication to take note of those statements which all three factors ranked on the positive end of the scale and those statements which all three factors ranked on the negative end of the scale. The statements, "I enjoy the performances," "The plays evoke multiple levels of interpretation," "CTS plays cover controversial topics" and "The plays are thought-provoking works" were ranked on the positive end of the scale by all three factors. Since certain factors ranked some statements



much higher than other factors, we may assume that the greater weight given to a statement (or several statements that fall into the same categorical grouping) can indeed distinguish that factor from the others. For example, the statement "CTS plays cover controversial topics" was ranked positively by all factors. However, while factor C gave it a ranking of +5, factors A and B both gave it a ranking of +2.

More genuine consensus appears to exist on matters that are *not* critical as motivational considerations for all three factors. The statements, "CTS generates awareness of community issues," "CTS helps other non-profit groups raise funds," "Shows benefit local causes," "I like giving to charity," "I like the small casts" and "The plays are performed in diverse venues" were ranked on the negative end of the scale by all three factors. It seems apparent from this set that the philanthropic element is not an important reason for the present CTS audience to attend.

### Discussion: Messages and Publics

There is much that CTS might learn from these findings. Themes have emerged that will be useful to CTS in developing direct mail and advertising messages for audience recruitment and fundraising. A greater knowledge of who makes up CTS's audience gives insight into where CTS should look to recruit new attendees and subscribers. Finally, there is evidence that CTS is on track with some of its strategies while it may want to consider changing others.

The findings concerning factor B, whose members prefer theater as their entertainment of choice, support the development of messages that stress the quality of CTS productions. Materials that support CTS's reputation, such as favorable reviews of CTS shows, and any awards CTS may have received, would be very helpful in resonating with factor B elements in the Syracuse area. In addition, factor B members value CTS as a social outlet. Therefore, recruitment drives that call attention to the social aspect of CTS, or messages that discuss CTS performances as an opportunity to meet people, should be well received. Finally, because this factor is made up of people who choose theater, CTS may want to target regular theater-goers in the Syracuse community. To this end, list exchanges with other theater groups would be very helpful.

Factor C resonates strongly to the intellectual challenge to be found in CTS plays and their "contemporary" nature. To this end, messages

should be developed that feature CTS as a "thinking person's theater" with descriptions of shows that "stretch the mind" or provide an intellectual challenge. Messages of this nature should be targeted at publics who seek other forms of intellectual stimulation through entertainment.

Factor A is made up of people who are strongly driven by a belief that theater is a worthy art form. Messages for this group should stress that CTS provides a unique forum for contemporary plays and that CTS "breathes new life" into theater. Participants associated with factor A may have a personal connection to theater as an art form possibly through study of—or participation in—the performing arts. Messages appropriate to factor A should therefore be targeted to members of the local theater community of students, professionals and volunteers.

While the literature suggested that a discount associated with theater subscription is a primary motivator for those who subscribe (Mitchell, 1984), our research indicated otherwise. Statements associated with financial reward were ranked by all factors either negatively or low on the positive end of the scale (the highest score given to a statement of this nature was a +1).

### ***On Motivation***

Of particular note in these data is how participants ranked statements reflective of either intrinsic or extrinsic motivation. William Stephenson's (1967) *play theory* posits that individual's consumption of mass communication forms (including the performing arts) is intrinsically rewarding. Stephenson's ideas suggest that the very act of consuming or attending to the communication is, in and of itself, a pleasurable experience. Analysis of all three factors seem to support this theory; however, CTS has spent valuable dollars as well as great effort in designing audience recruitment campaigns that address extrinsic motivations. Therefore, our findings would counsel that the ludenic element in theater attendance be given greater attention when considering motivation in future communication campaigns designed to broaden CTS attendance.

### ***Evaluation of Current Strategies and Assumptions***

This research validates some of CTS's present approaches to audience recruitment. The participants in this research were generally

pleased with the quality of CTS productions and the choice of plays. They felt the quality was high. They also valued the contemporary nature of the CTS product; hence it would be unwise to drop "contemporary" from CTS's name—a tactic being considered by CTS at the time of the study. Because of the appreciation for the contemporary works, it is a wise strategy to target the students and faculty of the area's colleges and universities.

This research also offers some warnings for CTS. The vast majority of the participants consistently ranked the statements about CTS involvement with—and fundraising efforts for—other non-profits negatively. These efforts provide no additional incentives for the audience to attend. Therefore, given CTS's financial condition, it may be wise to drop the fundraising efforts for other groups and keep the extra dollar or two that would have been donated to other causes in CTS's coffers. Although this is not a surprise, the research emphasizes the audience's desire that CTS find a permanent home. The fact that CTS does not have a permanent venue has been an on-going issue for the theater's management.

### **A Concluding Note**

While marketing research has traditionally operated on the premise that large-sample surveys, fortified by the occasional use of focus groups, offer the surest route to identifying the mix of motives, feelings, wants and needs that fuel consumer choice, this study has taken a rather different tack. Rather than drawing a large, random sample of residents in the greater Syracuse metropolitan area, we have learned much about what motivates different types of theater-goers to attend and support community theater in Syracuse through the use of Q technique in a study of but ten cases.

And while we are of course obligated to caution against generalizing from such a small number of cases to thousands of persons who comprise the potential market for CTS productions, we are convinced of the value of our factors as operant microcosms of key market segments to which CTS will need to tailor its advertising if it hopes to more effectively reach and expand an audience of loyal supporters. It is quite unlikely, in our view, that these segments could have been identified by any means other than Q methodology.

## Appendix

## Factor Arrays in the CTS Q Study

Statement	Factors		
	A	B	C
I support community theater in general	+3	0	0
Enjoy the performances	+5	0	+1
Way to support and maintain a connection to the arts community	-2	+4	-2
CTS plays are a form of culture	+1	-3	+2
If I did not subscribe, I would not go regularly	0	0	-1
Want to belong to and support a community-based group	-1	+4	0
Enjoy the intimate setting	0	-2	+1
Enjoy supporting a less-mainstream form of the arts	0	+1	+3
To learn about current trends in theater	-3	-3	+3
CTS plays expose me to new ideas	+3	-1	+2
Subscribing makes it easier to plan ahead to do an activity	-1	+2	-1
I like supporting theater artists who live right here in Central New York	+3	-2	0
I like the small audiences and the interaction with actors and organizers	-2	-1	0
I buy two subscriptions and use the second to expose other to CTS	-5	+5	-4
I did community theater myself	+2	+4	-5
CTS productions "stretch my mind"	+1	-1	+1
It is a way to take advantage of the limited entertainment choices in Syracuse	-2	+2	+2
CTS generates awareness of important community issues	-3	-1	-1
I am happy with the artistic qualities of the CTS plays	+4	-2	-2
CTS helps other non-profit groups raise funds	-4	-4	-3
I like live theater	+5	+3	0
The plays reflect contemporary issues	+2	0	+4
It helps me to get out of an entertainment rut or routine	+1	+5	-4
I like the large variety of plays offered by CTS	-1	0	0
Shows benefit local causes	-2	-3	-2
I am interested in volunteering and getting more involved with CTS	-4	+1	-1
The plays invoke multiple levels of interpretation	+3	+2	+4
It is cheaper to buy a season ticket	0	+1	-2
I enjoy the stage sets and lighting	+2	-4	-3
I like giving to charity	0	-2	-2
I am familiar with an actor, playwright or director and want to see their work again	+4	-1	-4
The plays provide emotional stimulation	0	+1	+3
If I already have the tickets I will use them	-1	0	0
I like the small casts	-1	-5	-1
I see a play done by CTS and compare it to a previous performance by another group	-4	-3	-3
The plays are thought-provoking works	+4	+3	+4

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Subscribing ensures that I won't be locked out of popular shows	0	-2	-5
It is an opportunity to see plays by living and emerging playwrights	+2	0	+5
CTS plays cover controversial topics	+2	+2	+5
CTS plays represent a passion for life	-3	-5	+1
I want to be part of a cutting-edge theater company that is not afraid to take risks	-2	+3	+2
The plays are performed in diverse venues	-5	-4	-3
CTS plays spur interesting discussion among the attendees	-3	+3	+3
Subscriptions offer a 20% savings over single ticket prices	+1	+1	-2
Subscribing is a way to support new intellectual pursuits	+1	+2	+1

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