

CAROLINA BALLET: REMOVING BARRIERS FIRST

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Unlike the other arts groups profiled here, the Carolina Ballet did not exist when the Durham Arts Council first tackled the idea of a nine-county audience study in 1995. The Ballet's first season began in the fall of 1998, and remarkably, before the first dancer ever hit the stage, the founders had sold 2500 season tickets. How did they do it?

Perhaps no other group benefited more readily from the ADI data than did Carolina Ballet, but their success right out of the gate was the result of enormous staff expertise, planning, and research into audience preferences and reservations.

North Carolina, often called "The State of the Arts," is home to the nation's first state-supported symphony and art museum, both headquartered in Raleigh for more than half a century. In the field of ballet, however, only the North Carolina Dance Theater, founded in Winston Salem in 1970 and now headquartered in Charlotte, could claim to have a statewide presence as a ballet company. The founders of Carolina Ballet believed the state capital of Raleigh and the greater Triangle area were ready for such an artistic resource.

Determining barriers and opportunities: As a first step, the organizers of Carolina Ballet studied the first Durham Arts Council's marketing data to determine who was attending arts events in general and, more specifically, what demographic characteristics were reflected in audiences at the American Dance Festival and the ballets presented locally by the North Carolina Symphony. The Ballet then purchased lists from some local arts organizations to survey arts patrons about what barriers might impede these individuals' attendance if ballet were regularly offered in Raleigh.

Believing from the results that the availability of transportation to the performance sites for seniors in particular and the availability of childcare on site for younger parents, Carolina Ballet set about to accommodate these concerns in planning for its first season.

"What we found in the first year, however," says executive director Lisa Jones, "is that people really were not interested in childcare. They were not going to take their children to stay with strangers, even if the service we arranged was right across the street from the performance hall."

While transportation services in the form of bussing helped with initial subscription sales, Jones also says the organization soon realized that the scheduling of performances was actually the more critical factor in attendance than having group transportation available. The Ballet now schedules performances outside peak traffic patterns and continues to refine this aspect of its programming.

"Another key issue was the perception of quality," explains Lisa Jones. We learned that there was an attitude among some potential audience members that *if it is local it can't be that good.*" Overcoming this bias in favor of "imported" arts events of national stature figured prominently in the development of the Ballet's initial messages and branding efforts. The group also discovered a general bias against arts events among sports attendees of which there are many in the Triangle. The initial image to be projected

would have to be of an organization with world-class personnel, an organization that had listened to its prospective audience and had taken steps to make attendance easier for both skeptical and curious patrons.

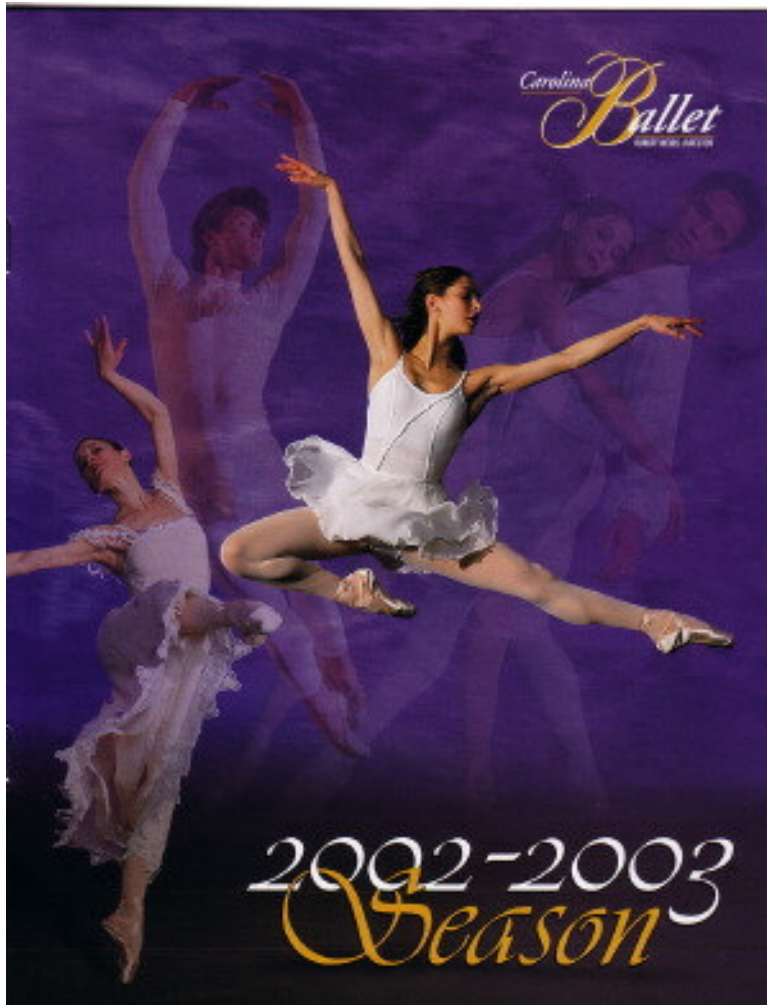
"We have been committed from the very beginning," says Jones, "to bring the most talented dancers and choreographers to this community. We will represent the best. While we know there are things we want to do artistically that we can't yet afford, we can be creative -- borrow costumes and sometimes offer programs in smaller, less expensive venues -- without compromising quality."

As artistic director and distinguished dance veteran Robert Weiss had intended all along, Carolina Ballet "came out of the box fully formed." Refusing to perform to music on tape as some start-up ballet companies have done, Carolina Ballet began with live symphonic accompaniment. Soon after its inaugural season, the company was invited to perform in Europe, at the Guggenheim in New York, and has been very favorably reviewed in major newspapers and dance periodicals in the U.S.

Cross mapping most likely ticket buyers and donors: "By 1998, we were clear about who we were going to be and how we would position ourselves," says Jones. Investing in Metroscan lists, (one of the database services available through the ADI), Carolina Ballet did initial mailings to a highly targeted group of prospects that had been cross mapped for a range of demographic characteristics and arts affiliations. From this group came the phenomenal first- season ticket sales.

Deepening organizational understanding of audiences: Now four years into the development of a database, Carolina Ballet is working to deepen its understanding of its donor and subscriber base by analyzing lifestyles, their locations across the Triangle by neighborhood, and further identifying their other arts affiliations. "We are asking, how does our list correlate with other groups?", Carolina Ballet's marketing director,

Lisa Blumberg explains. "What is different here from, say, the Symphony or NC Art Museum list? Are we skewing younger?"



By examining these issues, the Ballet is constantly refining its choices in mailing list rentals and niche targeting. "As a marketer, it is wonderful to have more precise options than zip codes as we create our mailings," says Lisa Blumberg. For the 2002-2003 season, Carolina Ballet purchased 17,000 names for its annual fund drive and 23,000 names to offer by direct mail a "mini-package" of performance tickets (not the full season) for fall. Their strategy is to add names in concentric rings around the geographic base of its support, reaching farther and farther afield while simultaneously reinforcing the Ballet's image as a statewide arts resource with a world-class product.

Recognizing that donor cultivation takes time: The preliminary results from the 17,000-name mailing for the Carolina Ballet's Annual Fund were not positive. Yet Lisa Jones recognizes that donor cultivation is a process that takes at least two years. "First we have to get them to come to a performance to experience the product," she says. "The next step is to sell them a ticket to a couple of events in a season; then to move them to subscriber status. Then we may be able to move them into the category of donor. This is a brand new market, a brand new resource. Taking individuals from one level to the next is a process we'd like to accelerate, but we probably won't know for two more years how successful some of our present marketing and fundraising efforts will be."

Incorporating a pitch with every performance: The Ballet's annual budget for 2002-2003 is \$5.1 million with approximately 45% of this figure coming from earned income. The rest must be raised in contributions. The current season is the first with an in-house telemarketing effort rather than donor solicitation by outsourcing to a telemarketing firm. To date, the largest gift the Ballet has received through in-house telemarketing was a \$25,000 pledge per year over three years. Smaller gifts are therefore essential. The insertion of a donor envelope in every program for every performance has become a critical means of solicitation. The envelope is a quiet "ask" that is made while the value and quality of the product is fresh on the prospect's mind.

Testing, testing, testing: Carolina Ballet has an unswerving artistic mission but has been willing to experiment with scheduling (testing performance times that vary by only a half hour), moving ballets that will not draw large audiences into smaller, more intimate venues, and even moving *The Messiah* -- traditionally a Christmas piece -- to dates around Easter. They have tested venues at Duke University, in the Raleigh bedroom community of Cary, and are continuing with a regular schedule of two annual visits to Winston-Salem where the North Carolina School of the Arts is located and from which the Ballet has drawn at least one prominent alumnus into its ranks. In the new

season, the Ballet will head to the North Carolina coast for performances in Wilmington.

Through a corporate grant from Progress Energy, the Ballet also brings in some 4,000 fifth graders to Raleigh for daytime performances. In addition to its work with these public school students, Carolina Ballet has also partnered with the Home Schooling Network to bring in a different cohort of children to see a performance. "In these performances for children, the kids only see one or two acts," says Blumberg, "so many of them really want come back to see the whole show with their parents."

Adopting a "Robin Hood strategy" to create financial security *and* room for experimentation: Carolina Ballet added *The Nutcracker* to its schedule in 2001-2002 with excellent results. "It is the only piece a ballet company can perform that will be income producing," explains Blumberg. By showing a profit on *The Nutcracker*, Carolina Ballet is freer to experiment with lesser-known ballets, to commission new works for world premiere that cannot be underwritten by ticket revenues, and to choreograph its own new works in house. *Carmen*, created for the first time as a ballet by Carolina Ballet's Robert Weiss, came about at the suggestion of audience members who actually assumed there *was* a ballet based on the opera *Carmen* and listed it on one of Carolina Ballet's many audience surveys as a performance they would like to see.

The Nutcracker has also helped cultivate a new demographic. While the predominant audience for Carolina Ballet was initially females 45 years of age and above, *The Nutcracker* drew in a large group of young mothers with children, increasing the 35-45 age cohort. Blumberg says the company looks forward to examining these ticket buyer lists against the general subscription list in the new season.

Building audience trust: "We believe and have evidence that people are building relationships with the dancers in this company," says Lisa Blumberg. Making the

dancers accessible to audiences after the show and at fundraising and other social events has been a big factor in creating a sense of ownership and connection to the enterprise among donors and ticket buyers alike.

Carolina Ballet opened with a \$3 million dollar capital outlay raised in gifts of \$1,000 and over from a "Founder's Circle." Only after audiences began to experience the product itself did the Ballet undertake an annual fund drive. By sustaining quality and continuing to monitor audience needs and preferences, Carolina Ballet, says Lisa Blumberg, has built a trusting audience -- so trusting and enthusiastic that the goal for 2002-2003 season is 4300 subscribers, nearly double the first season results, "and we are in a position to attain that goal," she says.

Developing quality product and service in tandem: "Still," says Blumberg, "if the show is good but people are treated poorly, it is not a good day." To this end, Carolina Ballet has developed several initiatives to guarantee good customer service. "We have someone who answers the phone and directs every call that comes into the Ballet during regular hours," Blumberg explains. "No machines with menus. We have an active box office staff that is dedicated to accommodating people's requests for ticket exchanges as much as possible. And all donors are thanked promptly, are invited to every event, and -- we hope -- feel appreciated." The Ballet is reassessing its volunteer program in the current season to determine how to enlist more assistance and to ensure a consistent level of audience services at performances.

A company that began with 26 dancers now has 35 and will present 80 performances in the current season. Carolina Ballet also has a new, 15,000- square-foot headquarters in North Raleigh where the administrative and artistic staff work side-by-side. The site includes rehearsal space with sprung floors, locker and meeting rooms, and costume storage. In five more years, Lisa Blumberg hopes for 10,000 subscribers with 60% of its budget coming from earned income. Plans for an endowment campaign are also in the

works. Carolina Ballet has thus been a model start-up in arts marketing during the course of the ADI.