

Essay #3:

In Service of Our Art/The Art of Service: Using Customer Service and Other Corporate Concepts in Arts Non-Profits

By Lesley Williams

When I was asked to serve as a recorder for a session of the Durham Arts Council's "Shaping the Moment: A Customer Service Workshop", I felt that my years as a folklorist, state arts council administrator, and curator would serve me in good stead. But when I found out that I would be covering the session on box office operations, I was a bit unsure, since this is one area where I have very little experience. But I realized that I have years of experience as a box office consumer. While this by no means makes me an expert, I do know what does and doesn't work for me. Shortly after I committed to the workshop, I visited a venerable arts establishment for a performance that I was greatly anticipating, and I had one of my most negative box office experiences. I waited in line for about 45 minutes. I should say lines, plural, since there was a "Will Call" line, and a line for admittance to the house, but it was not clear which was which. Patrons just formed one large mass, which from time to time contracted to admit additional people into the cramped lobby. Soon the small foyer reached the saturation point and new arrivals had to wait outside in some pretty lousy weather. To make matters worse, the house opened around 10 minutes after the performance was scheduled to begin. It doesn't take any arts or business expertise to see that this box office had big problems. Now, I don't consider myself a hard-to-please consumer, but I was tired when I arrived at the venue, and the forty-five minutes I spent standing around to get my seat really took the wind out of my sails. Thus, I enjoyed the evening much less than I would have otherwise. Here was an instance when an organization certainly could have benefited from the concept of Customer Service.

Upon further reflection, I realized that customer service is just the latest example of how much the influence of corporate culture on the non-profit sector has increased significantly in the last decade. I first started working as an arts administrator at the state level in the late '80s, just before the Mapplethorpe and Serrano controversies launched us into a period of political combat that I like to call the "culture wars." Arts agencies were besieged at that time, and our main concern was survival. But much has changed since then and the social climate has become somewhat less hostile. The economic success of the "new economy" has trickled down to cultural organizations, and as a result, many arts groups have grown and prospered. As our staff, programming, facilities and budgets have grown, so too has our sophistication about how we operate. Arts administration is now being viewed as a bona fide profession, something now worthy of an advanced degree.

It was during the "culture wars" that many of us began to realize that we needed to demonstrate to others the value of what we do. As artists and arts administrators, we were convinced of the importance of our work - many of us approach it with something akin to missionary zeal. This belief was so prevalent in the field that we did not spend a lot of time figuring out how to persuade others that what we do has merit. We found out the hard way, however, that the cultural arena had as much need for positive public relations efforts as any other economic sector.

Thus, in the early nineties, we began to learn how to sell ourselves. We came face to face with the reality that in order to maintain the old pipelines of public funding and establish access to new avenues of private money, we were going to have to learn to champion our own cause in the marketplace. In order to do this, we had to step back, take stock and ask ourselves: whom did we serve and how did we serve them? We had a strong belief that our work touched many lives, but we had to go in search of the data to prove it. In other words, we had to learn to do our market research.

Practitioners in our field then generated some impressive statistics about the arts' economic impact, their ability to facilitate the educational process for youth, and their role in improving the quality of life. In order to give our marketing a grassroots twist, we mobilized the people we served to speak up for us. In many states, local arts advocates built networks that not only kept arts funding from being cut, but which even leveraged increases in public monies. During this period we learned to communicate with a wider public. Corporate culture, with its emphasis on selling, gave us a number of tools for winning over converts. Using for-profit standards, we were forced to look at our work in terms of the services and products that we offer.

We also began to adopt the language of the marketplace. The outcomes of our labors were no longer grants, plays, exhibitions or concerts, they were "products" and "services." Our organizational heads went from being plain old "directors", to carrying the appellations "chief executive officers". We spoke less about "fundraising" and thought more in terms of "development". Sponsors moved away from "giving grants" and began "making investments".

In recent times, mission statements and strategic plans have come to be viewed as essential operating tools. It used to be that many arts organizations viewed these as luxuries, things in which they did not have the time to indulge. I've facilitated many a meeting where staff went in kicking and screaming, only to realize that the process of planning and refining their mission would actually provide the organization with focus and often make their work easier.

Organizations that were not accustomed to thinking beyond the next season were now being made to think five and ten years down the line. Groups with long histories realized that their role and function in their communities had changed considerably, yet they had never discussed the transitions. Many found that what seemed to be a time-consuming, pointless exercise was really a method for reenergizing their purpose.

Now we find it is common to use entrepreneurial standards to analyze and evaluate our operations. For many of us, it is difficult to make the transition to thinking about our work in these terms. Corporate models tend to quantify things, and we find it hard to attach numbers to the quality of an aesthetic experience. Most of us certainly are not in this field for the money, and so have been unwilling to adopt the standards of the for-profit sector. But at the very least, corporate models can give us a starting place to measure our performance.

Evaluation has never been our strong suit. Again, many of us saw it as a luxury. We've been too worried about keeping the lights on, staying fully staffed, getting people in the door, writing the next grant. We've measured success in rather rudimentary terms - do we get funding for our project, does the event actually take place as planned, how large is the audience, does the occasion go off without any major hitches? Corporate models can offer us more complex frameworks for evaluating many of the systems that are in use in our organizations.

So how does all of this relate to the box office? In many respects, the box office is the one area of arts nonprofit operations that conforms most easily to corporate models. This is the front line of many organizations, the most direct point of contact with the marketplace. It is the place that is most readily evaluated in terms of the bottom line. The most obvious measure of success is - how many tickets did we sell? Yet Steve Davis, Executive Director of Performance Facilities for the North Carolina School of the Arts, tells us that that is not the full story. We also need to ask:

- Was the box office easy to find?
- Was the process of purchasing and/or picking up tickets a positive one for the customer?
- Was the patron given information about other programs that might be of interest?

- Were the box office personnel able to give information about the content of the event?
- Was the interaction expedited?
- Did the patron have alternatives to buying tickets in person, i.e. phone purchases, on-line purchases?

Commercial sector models give tools to measure our interactions with the public beyond asking "Did anybody show up?"

Now that we are providing goods and services, we need to learn techniques for:

- Convincing people that we have a quality product
- Convincing people that they need our goods or services
- Making the process of acquiring the product as easy as possible

These models can go a long way towards helping us operate more efficiently.

I think it's very important, however, that we not accept all of the corporate paradigms without question. We need to undergo a very careful process of deciding which mechanisms work for us and which do not. We also need to recognize that those employed in private industry are not the only ones with expertise. There are many people in our field with the wisdom, experience and resources to generate our own frameworks for analysis and evaluation.

The box office operation is a good example of the pros and cons of applying corporate culture to our operations. Steve Davis spoke about a management style that requires a supervisor to be intimately acquainted with the responsibilities of those who work under her. Periodically Davis, whose responsibilities include

managing the Stephens Center for the Performing Arts in Winston-Salem, gives box office personnel the day off and does their job for them. This gives him first-hand experience with the challenges of working the front lines and keeps him from taking other employees for granted. His is a very human approach to managing others.

Yet we also heard during the workshop about models of employee management that require staffers who work with the public to adhere to dress codes and other rules concerning their appearance. This makes me uncomfortable because I've always felt that one thing that the non-profit sector has to offer is a less rigid work atmosphere where individuals can express themselves even in their attire. Arts organizations, of all places, should be places that can accommodate a variety of personalities and personal aesthetics. I am wary of standards that seek to enforce conformity.

This leads to one of the main concerns about applying private industry methods to our endeavors. The motivation of arts organizations is fundamentally different from that of corporations. Underlying the missions of cultural organizations is the desire to communicate the range of human experience and emotion to as many people as possible. Underlying the missions of businesses is the desire to make money. What this means is that unlike corporate entities, our success or failure cannot be measured solely in terms of dollars. Money is a means to an end for us, not our *raison d'être*.

Although we may devote more energy to increasing the percentage of our budget that comes from earned income, these efforts should be in service of building more stable organizations and enhancing our products and services.

Improving box office operations is still just a tool for us. Increasing income by raising ticket sales and streamlining procedures is a way to give us more resources to reach more people with higher quality art - not simply to get more dollars. So, while we may choose to use some corporate methods to make our organizations function better, our bottom line is not their bottom line.

It is also important to note that certain characteristics of our work culture are more developed than those of the private sector. For instance, we have long been aware of the value of racial, ethnic, gender, and class diversity among our staffs and our constituencies. Businesses have been slow to accept this notion, and most still see embracing diversity merely as a means of increasing sales, not as a way of enriching quality of life. We also have a great deal of experience working with grassroots communities. The notion of "community" may represent the latest socioeconomic buzzword for some, but for many arts groups, it's always been a way of working. And in terms of "fiscal responsibility" - well, nobody can make a buck go further than a non-profit organization.

We need not fear touting the value of creative expression and aesthetic encounter for their own sakes. It is worthwhile to discuss 'the Mozart Effect', talk about the arts as a deterrent to youth drug abuse, or cite the increase of cultural tourism as a source of income for local economies. Yet it is just as legitimate to celebrate art as an essential part of the human experience. Once again, we need not justify what we do only in terms of how it can serve others' agendas. Sometimes making and experiencing art should be sufficient unto itself.

What I believe we should concentrate on now is developing our own methods of communicating, operating and evaluating. It is up to us to set our own standards of success. It is our responsibility to develop our own measures of how well we do or do not serve our communities. It is incumbent upon us to figure out how to demonstrate that our work enhances the quality of life for those we serve. Let's continue to familiarize ourselves with corporate models, decide what we can use, adapt some of the concepts, and consign the rest to cyberstorage. We can draw upon corporate paradigms without discarding all of ours.

I don't believe that this will present a huge challenge to our field. After all, we have no shortage of ideas. We should take the imaginative energy that is so prevalent in our sector and apply it to developing our own tools and methodologies. What we must do is to bring our creativity to bear on the more routine aspects of our work. Why shouldn't customer service be an art? The attention given to these tasks can only, in turn, be of service to our art.