

If you're like most theatre companies, your season brochure is your single most important marketing piece, one that needs to be presented as professionally as your onstage product.

Here are some expert tips to do just that, gleaned from designers and marketing experts.

KEEP IT SHORT AND DIRECT

Research indicated that most people don't read a brochure from front to back. Instead, they skip and skim. This means that each section has to stand on its own to grab attention and lead readers to the information they need to order tickets. Make sure there's a sales message embedded in every section of your piece.

Short sections of text are easier to read and provide more flexibility for the designer. So make the words work for you. Readers don't want to work hard to find what they need to know, so don't bury essential information.

Write in personal terms so that readers will feel you're talking to them. Use "you," "your" and "you're" whenever possible.

Avoid empty hyperbole. Don't say the show is "wonderful and exciting." Tell them how the show is wonderful or exciting. ("You'll gasp as the detective uncovers the murderer in the spine-tingling climax.") Be honest. However, don't oversell your capabilities or set up false expectations.

If you need help jump-starting your prose, we recommend *Words that Sell* by Richard Bayan [ISBN 0-80924-799-2, \$14.95, McGraw-Hill].

IT'S IN THE MAIL

A "self-mailer" is a brochure with space on the outside for a return address and mailing label, thus saving the cost of an envelope. It also allows for sales messages that can be seen before the piece is even opened.

If you prefer the more personal look of an envelope addressed to the patron, make it part of the sales package, too.

On the outside of the self-mailer or envelope, use an illustration, theme or line of copy from the brochure as a "teaser" (a few words that compel the reader to open the piece.) Examples: "America's favorite musical," or "You'll die laughing," followed by the word, "See inside for more details" in smaller print.

As most direct marketers will tell you, the most important thing is to get the reader to open your piece. Everything else depends on that.

SIZE COUNTS

You gain visibility if your brochure is different in shape and size from others that arrive in the mail. However, the postal service will not accept just any size piece. Also, dimensions affect the cost of printing because odd sizes can mean wastage when the printer trims the piece to size, and nonstandard brochures often demand custom envelopes.

Before committing resources, run the design by your printer and the post office branch where you will be mailing the piece. (Different postal branches have different opinions on just about everything.)

SUCCESS BY DESIGN

Design helps project an image of your company and your season. Not everyone who reads your brochure will be familiar with the plays you're presenting. It's important to stress entertainment, excitement, stimulation, and quality entertainment. And that can be done through design, as well as words. In fact, it can be done better.

Arts patrons tend to be well educated and are accustomed to high-quality printing. If they're not familiar with your company's work, they may make a value judgment based on the quality (writing, paper, photography, color) of your brochure. If you're on a tight budget, spend it on paper and reduce the number of colors. (Tip: Printers often keep a supply of high-quality "house stock" that is less expensive than special-order paper.)

PHOTOS AND GRAPHICS

Photographs give information quickly and memorably. Come in close on the actors (preferably no more than three); keep distracting backgrounds to a minimum.

Avoid grouping several photographs into a collage; one strong photo is more likely to grab the reader. If you do group photos, make the strongest photo much larger than the others.

Put a caption with every photograph. Research shows that people look at a photo first, then the caption. Captions should sell the season, not describe who's in the shot. Always look at what the photo "says" about your company and its productions.

If you don't have good photos, use simple, eye-catching illustrations to depict themes of plays. In fact, illustrations often work better, because they get an idea across quickly. Certainly a good graphic is better than a so-so photo.

COLOR RULES

Two-color printing is fine – especially on 60- to 80-pound paper – and you can use “screens” (tints) to vary the intensity and interest. For example, a 50-percent screen of red gives you pink, which can be used to overlay a 100-percent red background (or vice versa). You also can overlap screens of two colors to give the impression of three colors. Red and green overlapped become brown, yellow and blue become green, and so on.

Four-color processing produces the full color spectrum, but adds substantially to the cost. If you have high-quality color photos and a healthy budget, it's worth it. However, marginal photos won't improve in full color; in fact, they'll look worse. Color photos look best on glossy paper.

GOOD FORM

A season brochure is meant to sell tickets. If you want good results, make the order form easy to understand and complete. Lead the ticket buyer through each step of the process so that you collect all essential information to process the order. And make sure the form is big enough so that the patron has enough room to write legibly.

Test your brochure with people who are unfamiliar with it, and have them try to fill out the response form in your presence. Observe what they look for and how easily they find it. Be on the alert for signs of confusion. And listen to what they say.

Run all forms past the box office manager to make sure the form provides all the necessary information to complete an order. Ask what mistakes purchasers make most often, then review your order form to see if it can be improved to reduce such problems.

Creating effective brochures can be a quick and painless task. Following the above guidelines will definitely help make them a great sell for your theatre.