



Business to Arts
Developing Creative
Partnerships



DeVosInstitute
of Arts Management at the Kennedy Center

Business to Arts/DeVos Institute Case Study— The Abbey Theatre

Integration of Marketing and Fundraising Efforts

The Abbey Theatre, the national theatre of Ireland, was founded in 1904 by W. B. Yeats and Lady Augusta Gregory. The Abbey Theatre commissions and produces new work and creates discourse and debate on political, social and cultural issues. Over the years, the Abbey Theatre has nurtured and premiered the work of major Irish playwrights and currently maintains the only full time Literary Department in Ireland.



The Abbey Theatre's Mission

Creating a world-class theatre that actively engages with and reflects Irish society: We place the writer and the theatre artist at the heart of the Abbey Theatre.

The Challenge—A Shifting Business Model

Since 2009, grant aid received from the Abbey Theatre's major stakeholder, the Arts Council of Ireland, has been cut by over 20%. Recently, it decreased from €7.1 million to €6.5 million.

A resulting reality was that the Abbey Theatre was required to increase its effort to engage and cultivate private sector donors. At the same time, it was clear that internal resources available to build the fundraising effort were limited. A strategic approach was required to leverage the efforts of the marketing department to create institutional visibility in order to support the membership and major donor efforts. In particular, it was vital that Abbey Theatre staff worked together to ensure a high level of efficiency between the fundraising and marketing departments—the two “public faces” of the institution. Within a large institution such as the Abbey Theatre, this would require a significant change in working culture. There was not a euro or moment to waste.

A. Strategy One—The Integration of Marketing Activity with Fundraising Activity

Evaluation

As a part of the Business to Arts/DeVos Institute process, the Abbey Theatre immediately commenced an audit of its current fundraising and marketing programmes.

It found that while marketing activity to sell tickets (*programmatic* marketing) was very strong, significant improvements were required around its efforts to promote the theatre as an institution on the whole (*institutional* marketing). It was determined that a relative lack of focus on the image of the institution overall had limited its efforts to fundraise. Its changed circumstances would require a thorough renewal of this process.

Abbey Theatre senior staff determined that a strong institutional marketing message would moreover assist in the retention of current donors, re-igniting their interest and re-enforcing the message that the Abbey Theatre, as an organisation, is of international relevance, “un-ignorable” and worth investing in.

Integration of Marketing and Fundraising Efforts

Using the DeVos Institute’s *Cycle* as a platform, senior marketing and fundraising staff created a joint organising tool—a simple Excel spreadsheet—to ensure that its improved institutional marketing efforts would be adequately leveraged for fundraising purposes.

While relatively new, this tool has enabled a systematic approach to linking its institutional marketing and donor cultivation efforts:

- For each month of 2014, Abbey Theatre marketing staff identified a clear key message, punctuated by a series of discrete institutional marketing efforts (a special event, announcement, high-visibility outreach performance, press push, debate series, etc.).

- Fundraising staff sought opportunities to leverage each institutional marketing effort for cultivation purposes, often by creating a segmented, high-access experience for prospective and current donors. With awareness that, in order to influence a prospect to the stage of making a gift, a high level of attention is often required, this aspect of the Abbey Theatre’s development effort has evolved into a highly-focused approach to key individuals who can make a significant financial difference. These “game changers” receive a sustained effort over a substantial period of time.
- Cultivation efforts are targeted toward the specific interest of the “game changer.” For example, the organisation ensured that socially-motivated donors were invited to high-profile, “exclusive” social occasions like season launches and opening night performances, while “status”-driven donors gain access to artists, theatre leadership, influential board members, and other “power brokers.”

Strategy in Action

In January 2014, the Abbey Theatre closed its doors for three Mondays, and took its production of *The Risen People*, a play about the 1913 Lockout, into various communities around Dublin.

Of note, the work was performed for inmates at Wheatfield Prison, the first such performance in Abbey Theatre history. This performance was also a prime example of what the Institute would signify as an institutional marketing event; it was a performance, yes, but also a strategy designed to drive home the Abbey Theatre’s commitment to stimulating debate and engagement through work of social relevance.

The startling and uncommon undertaking of a performance in this setting was enough for the marketing department and development department to turn the moment into their advantage.

Abbey Theatre Planning Template to Integrate Marketing and Fundraising Efforts

Month of Activity	Interest Group Targeted	Audience Type Targeted	Donor Type Targeted	Programmatic Marketing Plan	Artistic Event Utilised	Institutional Marketing Event Utilised	Story / Message Promoted through Event	Fundraising Activity tied to the Event	Status of Event
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The Outcome

The marketing department immediately secured prominent press coverage, including the front page of the *Irish Times*, notice in the *Irish Independent*, and on RTE Radio 1's Morning Ireland, to name a few. **Ticket sales jumped 15% over the previous Tuesday**, and helped drive the fourth best day of sales over the course of *The Risen People* on the Abbey Theatre's mainstage.

The development department likewise leveraged this institutional marketing opportunity. Several key board members were invited, one of whom described this event as "the real work of the national theatre in action", which had a "profound impact on the lives of citizens". As a result of their attendance, newly invigorated, these board members (both donors themselves), identified two new prospects for the organisation, one of which has already become a meaningful donor—a future "game changer" in their own right. Lastly, a corporate partner attended and immediately extended its relationship for another year.

At a second performance of *The Risen People* at Larkin College, the development department further leveraged the enthusiasm of its board, engaging yet another member to an extent that the individual hosted a subsequent cultivation dinner, resulting in two additional new donors to the Theatre, as well as an invitation to submit an application to a new potential funding partner (a charitable foundation).

Therefore, from these two events, the Abbey re-invigorated several key board members and a corporate partner; secured three new major donors; and opened the door to a new, potentially long-term funding relationship.

The senior team has a similar strategy in place for the remainder of 2014.

The Takeaway

This coordination of the marketing and fundraising efforts represented a major turning point in the productivity of these two essential functions. For the first time in the institution's history, the two departments are "thinking as one", with the ultimate goal of expanding its "family" of donors and sponsors.

This event was a key example of the Abbey Theatre delivering a strong external narrative to the wider community through an institutional marketing initiative. This did not cost the organisation any money, and yet was featured in important national publications, yielding huge national interest.

The event showcased the quality and relevance of the Abbey Theatre programming to its invited guests, but also presented potential donors with an exclusive opportunity to see the impact of the Abbey Theatre's mission in action in an unconventional community setting.

In an effort to create as many genuine, intimate and exclusive events as possible for the continued cultivation of its family, the Abbey Theatre will continue to play to its strengths, using its programme and the resources close to hand to create institutional marketing and cultivation opportunities.

B. Strategy Two—Renewing the Abbey Theatre's Membership Programme

Evaluation

Simultaneously, as part of the audit conducted by Abbey Theatre development staff at the onset of the Business to Arts/DeVos Institute programme, Abbey Theatre leadership determined that an equal investment in the **cultivation and stewardship of its members**, or lower-level donors, stood to deliver exponential results.

Whereas the Abbey Theatre understood the potential upside of this effort, at the time, its membership programme could not have been characterised as truly unique or high-profile. Additionally, limited financial resources could be devoted to its overhaul. But, in order to diversify the sources of revenue upon which it could rely—especially in a troubled economic climate—Abbey Theatre leadership recognised that entry-level gifts could not be overlooked. An effort that leveraged the institutional marketing effort and utilised staff time sparingly, but delivered strong results, was the resulting mandate.

Making Membership Truly Special

As a consequence, the Abbey Theatre determined to re-structure and re-brand its *membership*:

- 5 levels of support were created, ranging from €25 to €500, making membership more accessible to a wider public.
- The *Membership Campaign* was resourced internally involving an integrated effort between the Abbey Theatre marketing department and the sales and customer service department.
- The team embraced a culture shift toward treating *members* as *family*—even internally referring to members as “family” following the re-brand.
- The membership was given increased visibility and physical presence in the theatre through re-branded brochures, posters, and a pop-up membership desk.
- The programme was featured in programmes and on the organisation’s website, and on the “Thank You for Coming” triggered email that all audience members receive post show.
- Audience members who attend three shows now automatically receive a personalised email promoting membership.

Additionally, in order to provide low-cost, high-impact benefits for members, the development staff utilised institutional marketing resources as cultivation opportunities, such as:

- An exclusive *Members* visit to the cutting room of the costume department.
- Identifying key artists, directors, and designers to do pre- and post-show events with members.
- A special, “Women at the Abbey Theatre” event showcasing the talents of staff members and the history of women in the development and success of the theatre.

The Outcome

In one year, the Theatre more than doubled its membership base, from **304 in 2013 to 615 in 2014**. This represented a **52% growth** in membership income.



Additionally, 17% of the 189 membership renewals in 2013 increased their giving from one level to the next.

During the same period, **total individual giving grew from €88,575 in 2011 to €120,636 in 2013**, representing an **impressive 36% increase since the beginning of the Business to Arts/DeVos Institute programme**.



Summary

In a moment of financial difficulty for the nation overall, the Abbey Theatre recognised that in order to survive, it would be required to adapt to the need to develop more support from a broader base of donors. This led to a fundamental re-thinking of the relationship between two primary internal functions: marketing and fundraising.

Senior leadership understood—and took action upon the realisation that—for the Abbey Theatre to substantially increase gifts from individuals, it needed to adopt a holistic approach to its fundraising effort, starting with the alignment of its marketing and fundraising priorities. It became quite clear that without a full-scale coordination between the two departments, an adequate response from the development department would likely cost more than it would produce.

By utilising the assets produced by the marketing effort, the fundraising team has been able to create real traction around the development of new entry-level and major donors.

While this work is far from complete, a substantial culture shift has taken place, one that will position the Abbey Theatre for even greater advances in the years to come.