CENTERPIECE
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DEVELOPMENT & MARKETING
....

SELLING YOUR THEATRE
ON THE INTERNET

BY LINDA GEESON

It's not news that the internet is revolutionizing the way we live, work and play. But a quick surf through cyberspace reveals that TCG theatres have used this important new tool to greatly varying degrees. Some theatres have a simple site with general information and a few photographs — basically an online brochure; others now sell tickets and accept contributions online, demonstrating moderately sophisticated use of "e-commerce;" and still others have made their websites high-tech and interactive, with streaming audio or video. Where your theatre falls on this continuum probably depends on factors as varied as the size of your budget and staff, whether you or someone at the theatre has a personal interest in or talent for web programming, and maybe even whether you have a generous high-tech trustee or donor.

Most of us, I think, would at least like to be able to sell tickets and raise funds online, and that technology is rapidly coming within reach of almost any size theatre. Last month Center Stage became the second TCG theatre (Seattle Repertory was first) to go "live" with Tickets.com. This means that visitors to the Center Stage website (www.centerstage.org) now can click on a link I've set up and see an inviting, well-organized Tickets.com computer screen listing all the performances of the play they want to see, choose the best seat available from our charts and charge their tickets to a major credit card without ever leaving the theatre's website. An account is automatically created for them in our system, capturing all their critical data for our future use and we print and mail their tickets.

Started less than two years ago as a partnership with California-based Advantix, Inc., Tickets.com is arguably already the web's premiere ticketing portal (which, in internet terms, means an organized gateway to lots of other websites), in addition to the content and services they themselves provide. They're so determined to be "the ultimate resource for tickets and entertainment information," according to their website, that last year they paid $1 million for the telephone number 1-800-TICKETS. They'll even direct buyers to one of their competitors if that's where the tickets they want are. And now that they've acquired the providers of virtually all the top ticketing software used at most regional theatres — Prologue, SQL or ArtSoft — Tickets.com represents more than 4,000 venues and a quarter-million annual events. If you use one of these programs, you very soon should have the ability to add ticket sales to your website using technology no more complicated than a hyperlink.

Philanthropy sites also are springing up all over the web. America Online, with 14 million members and a brand name net "newbies" trust to guide them to interesting and legitimate websites, has founded what promises to be one of the most useful, Helping.org. They'll link donors and volunteers with your theatre and even handle online credit card donations (you still pay your usual credit card merchant fees, but they charge no fees of their own). As long as you're a 501(c)3 organization, your theatre probably is already in the Helping.org database (provided by Guidestar.org, a nonprofit information-gathering site), but visiting the website (www.helping.org, of course) gives you a chance to include more information about your theatre, including volunteer opportunities and links back to your own website. Helping.org also provides great resources for nonprofits seeking to get wired or to better use the internet to serve their mission. It's a great site.

Many general interest theatre sites have sprung up in the last few years, although some tend to focus primarily on Broadway and other New York-based theatres. One of my personal favorites — and one that gives equal time to theatres far and wide, large and small, is AmericanTheatreWeb.com. Founded in September 1998 by Andrew Propst — activist, theatre lover, "24/7 cybersurfin' dude," and former Development staffer at the New York Shakespeare Festival — the site aims to be "an internet home for everything from Broadway to regional theatres to community theatres." In an increasingly mobile society, it can be more than just interesting to browse ATW listings from around the country; it can be fruitful. "I found myself traveling to Omaha, which as it turns out has a very vibrant theatre community," Propst recalls of his inspiration for ATW. "But it was hard for somebody coming from New York to know that and plan what to see during my trip. I want our site to be where people go when they want to find out what's happening in theatres everywhere, not just in an eight-square-block area of Manhattan."

Propst works hard to keep ATW current for the 35,000 visitors the site gets each month, but he can't do it without the help of the theatres he aims to serve. If you haven't already, he encourages you to add him to your press list (80 Bay Landing, Staten Island, NY 10301) and to email him (info@americantheatreweb.com) if you have questions or ideas for ATW. If you're looking to create or re-design a website, Propst can also be hired as a consultant, but he offers this free advice to all theatres operating websites: make sure you include both an email address and a postal address on your home page. Otherwise visitors sometimes don't know if they're looking at the site for a theatre in the next town over or across the continent.

Last, but certainly not least, don't forget to visit the new and improved TCG website (www.tcg.org), which was re-launched in October with a beautiful new interface and greatly increased usefulness.

Paul Ventura's article that follows is a primer on other ways to use the web to promote your nonprofit, and it's followed by a list of great websites where you can find other useful information. In addition, Lisa Salomon and I would love to convene a regular online chat with our fellow marketing and development directors around the country. Anyone with web access can take part (and have a say in setting the dates and times). Please email me if you're interested (lgeeson@centerstage.org).

See you in cyberspace.

THE INTERNET IS A FUNDRAISER'S DREAM

BY PAUL G. VENTURA

Listening to the hype about the Internet, one gets the impression that it's at once a faucet for unlimited information flow, a parent's nightmare, and a powerful tool for teaching, learning, and communicating. The reality is that the Internet is another in a long line of technologies, like television, radio, and CD-ROMs, to move information and ideas from one place to another. That it does so with such remarkable speed and reach has made it an immediately attractive medium for those who seek to extract money from others.

Among the nonprofit fundraising community, a vibrant dialogue is taking place, weighing the merits of the Internet as a way to build relationships with donors alongside traditional means such as, direct mail appeals or special events.

ASK YOURSELF:
- Would I like to have a convenient, up-to-date source of potential grant opportunities for my organization?
- Would I like to increase our membership?
- Would I like to identify potential new donors or increase the giving of existing ones?
- Would I like tips on fundraising strategies and tactics that work? Or those that don't?
- Would I like to improve my skills in grantwriting, running a special event, or soliciting individual donors?
- Would I like to be able to ask questions to a large number of colleagues and get solid, timely answers?

If your answer to any or all of these questions is "yes," then you'll be pleased to know that the Internet and the World Wide Web have some of the treasures you seek. There are

websites that have successfully generated revenue from new memberships, online contributions and the sale of items. There are mailing lists and newsgroups discussing the latest topics in the field of fundraising. There are online journals reporting recent developments in taxation on charitable contributions and other regulations. Some online forums serve as yearlong professional conferences — without the wine & cheese receptions, unfortunately. So, for many fundraisers, the Internet is a dream come true.

But to describe the Internet as a dream acknowledges that it is not precisely the same as reality. Not all the information you might want is available online. Even if it is, it may be so difficult to find that it soon proves unworthy of the effort. Besides, not all potential benefactors are online, nor use the Internet regularly and then perhaps only for email. Certainly, it's a rare web surfer who ventures into the cyberwaves specifically to give away money or time.

Nonetheless, during its short life the Internet is proving to be one of many indispensable tools in the web-wise fundraiser's portfolio. According to the latest GIVING USA report, over $150 billion was earned by U.S. nonprofits in 1996, the majority of it (about 80%) from individual contributors. If the Internet could help you obtain an appropriate share of those funds, wouldn't you want to use it?

The Internet can also help in finding potential grants. No, don't throw away your subscription to all of those publications you receive. What the Internet offers does not yet replace the Foundation Center's and other organizations' directories. But it will help you locate some potential funders and does provide some more up-to-date information than even the most current written publication can. Secondly, the Internet can help in identifying new members and donors, as well as maintain and support existing ones. This paper will review what some nonprofits, both large and small, are doing in this area.

Third, and perhaps most successfully, the Internet already serves as an excellent vehicle for professional development and networking. A number of websites now offer solid information and tips on fundraising methods, and newsgroups and mailing lists (also known as listservs) offer forums for fundraisers to share questions and ideas.

WHO IS THE INTERNET COMMUNITY?

Many nonprofit leaders are skeptical about the Internet user. For many of us, the stereotype of the netizen is either a "nerdy techno-dweeb" or a preadolescent whiz kid. It can be hard to conjure up an image of our board members, volunteers and donors as avid web surfers. And while the early adopter of telecommunications technology was probably a peculiar breed, today's Internet user is likely to resemble the general population.

CyberAtlas, www.cyberatlas.com, a web site that collects and disseminates data on internet usage, provides some illuminating data [editor's note: figures updated through October 1999]:

- Over 110 million people in the U.S., and another 20-30 million worldwide, are estimated to have regular Internet access.
- Almost half (between 41-45%) of all U.S. Internet users are women.
- Almost half of U.S. Internet users (45%) are over the age of 40. The average age found in one poll (by Georgia Tech) is about 35 years.
- Game-playing accounts for only 14% of web activity reported in a Business Week survey. The primary forms of Internet activity were found to be research (50% of online time) and education (37%), with entertainment at 31% and news at 30% of the time spent online.
- Over half of all Internet users have at least some college education or are college graduates. 18% have advanced degrees.
- Internet users, not surprisingly, tend to be more affluent than the general population — only 18% make less than $25,000 a year.

In an article in *Philanthropy Journal Online*, (philanthropy-journal.org), Jeffrey Hallett, Chairman and co-founder of New Media Publishing, suggests that the Internet could be a way to reach potential donors resistant to direct mail or phone appeals — those under the age of 35. Hallett describes this group as "influencers": "Not only are they the first on the Web, they are highly educated and generally leaders. Using the Web to engage them with our issue or cause can do more than trigger a donation. It can also help spread the word of our efforts as these influential people interact with others in their families, communities and elsewhere." The bottom line is that the Internet community is looking increasingly like your community. And that means that more of your donors and potential donors are joining the online community.

HOW IS THE INTERNET BEING USED TO FIND GRANTMAKING OPPORTUNITIES?

Anyone who has spent time writing grants knows that one of the more tiresome aspects of the job is finding the right funder and learning about its procedures and guidelines. Countless hours are spent poring through large red books or CD-ROM databases. The Internet does make some of this information available, either through online directories or with direct links to funding organizations.

Among the better known websites is that of the Foundation Center, fdncenter.org. The Center's web site has links to individual grantmaking institutions, as well as news. One useful feature is that of the common application form used by

several grantmakers in a particular area. For example, the common application form for a number of New York and New Jersey-based grantmakers is available online. In addition, one can search for and read articles from the Center's publication, *Philanthropy News Digest.*

Many foundations have created their own web pages to highlight their programs and to provide information for potential grantees. Many of these can be found by searching the directories above, either by foundation name, geographic area of support or funding categories. A no-frills example of a foundation's web site is that of the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, www.rbf.org/rbf. On the site, one can find funding guidelines and a recent grant history, but as yet, there is no provision for an online grant application.

Flashier models can be found at the websites of the Pew Charitable Trusts, www.pewtrusts.com, and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, www.rwjf.org, which does offer a low-bandwidth, text-only version. Both sites feature several of the projects and programs these donors fund in the areas of education and public health.

The U.S. government maintains a web site called FedWorld, www.fedworld.gov, which links all government agencies. The site is particularly useful, as some agencies like the Department of Education and the Department of Health and Human Services provide information about upcoming grants. The service is free but does require registration, which can be done online. Another source of information on individual funders is the Support Centers of America, whose web site, www.igc.org/sca, features monthly interviews with grantmakers, including those from little-known family foundations.

Don't expect to find that every foundation with a web site shares its grantmaking procedures online. The Windham Foundation of Vermont, for instance, has a web site, which describes its activities, but does not provide any information on its grant making. According to Foundation staffer Gail Woods, "The Windham Foundation, along with its two subsidiaries, established its web site in January 1997. We get somewhere between two to three thousand hits per month. The Foundation's purpose for having a web site was to promote Grafton as a great place to visit and also to give exposure for The Old Tavern and The Grafton Village Cheese Company, our two subsidiaries. We do not emphasize our grants program because only Vermont nonprofit organizations qualify and were afraid we would be spending too much time responding to people who do not."

This suggests that the web-wise funder recognizes the power and reach of the Internet and uses it in ways appropriate to its mission. The next section examines how the web-wise fundraiser can do the same.

HOW IS THE INTERNET BEING USED TO CULTIVATE MEMBERS AND DONORS?

Over the last year, hundreds of nonprofit organizations created their first web site. Some are modest and were created in-house with some bare bones HTML (hypertext markup language, the language of the web). Others are elaborate affairs, requiring substantial investment of time and money not only to create but to maintain.

A fine example of a web site designed not only to inform but to allow the user to have fun is that of the Appalachian Mountain Club (AMC), www.outdoors.org. The site is new, only established in June of this year, but already receives several hundred visits a week. "We don't really know yet how many visitors we have, as the site is so new," says Gordon Hardy, AMC web director. He referred to the factor of seasonality with respect to online visits. When the weather is nice, Hardy suggests fewer AMC-types are likely to be online; they're out hiking the trails. But when the weather is inclement, people are more likely to browse the web. If Hardy is correct in his speculations, then it will be at least a year for a pattern of site usage to emerge.

According to Hardy, the purpose of the AMC site is to build an online community among AMC members. It tries to do this by providing timely information, including something called "Hut Flash," which allows site visitors to see what trail huts are available for a given date and location. Another feature is AMC's "Campfire," an online bulletin-board, where site visitors can post messages and read those left by others. Although these features are currently available to non-members, future ones may be geared to members only. AMC provides a means for new members to join online, and although exact figures weren't available from Hardy, he does say that the site has generated "more memberships than we expected." Because the bulk of AMC operating revenue comes from memberships, an online presence is critical to its overall fundraising strategy. "More than half of our [current] membership is online," says Hardy.

ASK YOURSELF:

- Do I know how many of our members or donors have Internet access?
- Do I know how many of them use it regularly?

One organization that has taken advantage of the symbiosis between its mission and the online community is the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). The ACLU web site, www.aclu.org, was among the first for a national nonprofit and happened to go online at the same time as the national

debate on the Decency in Communications Act proposed in Congress. The Act passed, but has more recently lost some muscle, in no small way attributed to the outcry by the Internet community. It is no surprise that this community of users would be advocates of free speech, the fundamental tenet of the ACLU. Nor is it a surprise that its web site might be an appropriate means to enhance its fundraising among individual contributors. According to information in the book *Fundraising on the Internet*, Nick Allen of the fundraising consulting firm Mal Warwick & Associates indicates that the ACLU's web site raised around $18,000 in February of 1996, its first month online. For the nearly 600 online credit-card donors, the average gift was $31. By April of 1996, ACLU had raised about $25,000 online.

A recent ACLU campaign for a $25 million endowment, the "Trust for the Bill of Rights," was launched on the web. However, it did not ask for pledges online. Rather, its web site requested that interested parties submit a basic inquiry form, after which someone from the ACLU would contact the person(s) directly. The ACLU realizes that large gifts are not impulsive and still require a personal touch. Nonetheless, the ACLU's web presence may help them identify potential donors not currently known to them.

A web site that is almost legendary in the success of its online appeals is that of the American Red Cross (ARC), www.redcross.org. The nature of the ARC makes it an ideal candidate for a web presence — a nation-wide constituency and a need for a quick response to disasters. The ARC web site is designed with these functions in mind: to provide the most up-to-date information on catastrophes and to recruit volunteers and donors. Less than a year ago, the ARC web site did not offer an option of contributing online with a credit card. With improvements in electronic security, the ARC began to solicit online donations earlier this year. And if its track record is any indication, it should be successful. Before it began online collections, it found that 30% of donors calling its toll-free number said they found the number on the ARC web site; the vast majority also used their credit card for an immediate donation in lieu of a pledge for a later contribution. I know that immediately after the bombing in Oklahoma City, when I wanted to learn what sort of help was most critically needed, I went to the ARC web site to find out.

It is said that individual contributors to nonprofits sometimes want something in return for their gift. This may range from a small premium gift, to recognition, to a named endowment. Some organizations sell products to earn revenue for their programs in areas like conservation or human rights. The ACLU and the Sierra Club are two nonprofits, which have employed the web in their sales strategy. Typical items for sale include t-shirts, caps and books. Along with phone, fax and regular mail, the ACLU cyberstore has a secure online ordering option for credit cards. A similar system is in place at the Sierra Club's online store, at www.sierraclub.org.

Amnesty International was one of the first nonprofits to embrace computer technology for public education and advocacy; its CD-ROM has won several awards. Amnesty does have a small catalog of its publications on its web site, at www.amnesty.org.

ASK YOURSELF:
- Does our organization have anything special it could offer online?
- Any products, services, or information?
- Would we want to restrict access to these things to only members or donors?

At the other end of the spectrum are websites whose solicitation of funds is more subtle. Take the web site for Habitat for Humanity International, www.habitat.org. According to its webmaster, Scot Ninnemann, Habitat's site underwent a significant makeover in March 1997 (the original site was established in May of 1996). "Since the redesign," says Ninnemann, "we've been getting around 300,000 hits a month." A "hit" is recorded each time a web visitor browses a particular page, so the actual number of different visitors is less — Ninneman estimates those to be closer to 14,000 per month. The Habitat site is not aimed at direct donor solicitation, but rather at getting people into the organization, starting as a local volunteer. Says Ninneman: "We're mostly encouraging our visitors to get involved by contacting their local affiliates directly... We've received a few inquiries from people about the process of starting Habitat affiliates since there isn't yet one in their area, that's been really encouraging...So far, we've been viewing [the web site] primarily as an awareness-raising tool. The main goal is to provide up-to-date, accurate information about what Habitat is and how someone could get involved... Rather than do much of a 'hard ask' on the site, we're hoping that our information will get visitors excited about Habitat and encourage involvement/raise funds indirectly in that way."

The Habitat site does have a page called "The Extraordinary Gift Program," which is as close to an "ask" as the site gets. On this page, a few levels into the site, several examples of items needed for Habitat building projects are listed alongside their approximate costs, ranging from $10 for a floor joist to $250 for fifty bundles of roof shingles. Donors who choose to assist by giving a donation are asked to either print and send a form available online or to call a toll-free number. At present, Habitat does not have a direct online giving option, as it can be costly to create and maintain.

ASK YOURSELF:

- If our organization already has a web site, or even just an email address, does it appear on all of our print materials; newsletters, letterhead, business cards, and the like?

Like Habitat for Humanity, the Vermont Land Trust (VLT) takes a long view of donor cultivation, preferring to use its web site, www.vlt.org, to provide information and build a relationship of trust and credibility, without especially overt solicitation. One way in which it does this is to describe, in some detail, the various ways in which someone could support VLT, including cash contributions, charitable remainder trusts and giving of property. One particularly informative feature is the explanation of the tax implications of giving real estate. The web page provides an illustration of how much an individual could deduct for land with an estimated value of $80,000. An enhanced feature would be an online interactive calculator, which would allow a site visitor to plug in his or her own figures and see the results online.

Some websites have been devised specifically to assist potential donors in their decision-making. Among these is GuideStar, sponsored by nonprofit Philanthropic Research,

Inc. of Williamsburg, Virginia. The purpose of GuideStar (www.guidestar.org) is to make available "reports for all the nonprofit organizations to which contributions are tax-deductible." Its ambitious goal is to provide entries in its database for the 600,000 or so U.S. organizations classified as 501(c)3 by the IRS. According to Claire Stephens, PRI's Director of Marketing, GuideStar compiles data from the latest IRS 990 forms. PRI's President, Arthur Schmidt, describes the rationale this way: "Just as you wouldn't invest money in a company you don't know anything about, a donor shouldn't give money to an organization without understanding its objectives, values, and effectiveness. We want to help people become proactive in their philanthropy and seek out the nonprofits they believe in. As part of that effort, we want to make sure that donors find the information they need."

Paul G. Ventura is the President of Civil Society Advocates. This piece was originally presented to the 1997 New England Nonprofit Exposition, Brandeis University, Waltham, Massachusetts, July 29, 1997. Copyright © 1997-1998 Paul G. Ventura. Used with permission.

INTERNET RESOURCE LIST

www.wealthID.com: Thomson Financial Wealth Identification gives insider stock look-up info for a fee.
www.usc.edu/source: USC Prospect Research Website, great for California nonprofits.
www.pathfinder.com: Gateway to the current issue and archives of most Time Warner publications.
www.ipl.org/col/: The Internet Public Library Collection.
www.freeedgar.com: Searches SEC filings by company name or individual name.
www.corporateinformation.com: Pretty self-explanatory; great for researching prospects.
www.quote.yahoo.com: Company information, including insider stock info.
www.anywho.com: Phone and address look-up.
www.homepages.together.net/~akakii/research.html: List of bookmarks for prospect research.
www.schwab.com/schwabNOW/SNLibrary: Stock quotes and charts.
www.hoovers.com: Company information.
www.forbes.com/tool/toolbox: Search *Forbes* magazine archives.
www.weber.u.washington.edu/~dlamb/research.html: Many prospect research links from David Lamb.
www.555-1212.com: Directory assistance for phone and address look-ups, also a good resource for finding an area code.
www.companiesonline.com: Info on over 100,000 public and private companies.
www.zpub.com/sf/arl: The Annual Reports Library.
www.whitehouse.gov: 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue.
www.lcweb.loc.gov: The Library of Congress, with lots of searchable databases.
www.fedstats.gov: If the U.S. government collects stats on it, they're searchable here.
www.usps.gov: United States Postal Service — find those missing zip codes.
www.arts.endow.gov: National Endowment for the Arts.
www.neh.fed.us: National Endowment for the Humanities.
www.fdncenter.org: The Foundation Center.
www.philanthropy-journal.org: *The Philanthropy Journal Online*.
www.philanthropy.com: *The Chronicle of Philanthropy*.
www.interest.com/top100.html: Links to the country's top 100 newspapers.
www.fastcompany.com: If you're not already hooked on this *Manifesto for the New Economy* magazine, check it out online before you decide whether to subscribe.
www.sponsorship.com: IEG Sponsorship Group.
www.idealist.org: Action Without Borders provides a useful site for listing jobs, volunteer and internship opportunities and other info about all kinds of nonprofits.
www.cen.org: Center for Excellence in Nonprofits offers programs in leadership development, systemic change, continuous improvement and best practices.
www.guidestar.org: Users can find information on more than 700,000 nonprofits and the latest news on philanthropy, as well as resources for donors and nonprofits. Any 501(c)3 organization can participate for free by registering and posting its information on GuideStar with easy-to-use templates.
www.nonprofits.org: Information for and about nonprofits.
www.coyotecom.com: Jayne Cravens of Coyote Communications offers great free advice and links for nonprofits who want to work the web.
www.cyberatlas.com: Everything you ever wanted to know about traffic patterns on the web from a national and international perspective, including lots of market research.
www.tcg.org: The new and improved Theatre Communications Group website.
www.theatredb.com: A searchable database of info about theatres and productions, mostly commercial.
www.tdf.org/tktsplus/TKTSPLUS.html: A database with links to many New York, U.S. and international theatres, provided by Theatre Development Fund.
www.playbill.com: The online version of the country's most famous theatre publication.
www.culturefinder.com: Another great tool for exploring theatre and other arts offerings nationwide.
www.tonys.org: Online home of the Tony Awards.
www.imdb.com: The Internet Movie Database — even theatre managers have to get out of the office sometimes.