Theatres, Metaphors, and E-Collaboration:
An Examination of Web-Based Cooperation of Regional Nonprofit Theatres

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ABSTRACT

A metaphor methodology was used to understand and interpret the Web presences of 15 nonprofit theatres that comprise the regional theatre of Southern New Jersey that is present on the Web. In addition, findings from our earlier studies of off-Broadway and regional theatre festivals were extended to analyze the Web presence of the theatres in Southern New Jersey. The contribution of the work resides in its systematic and intense consideration of the strategic importance of the Web for nonprofit theatre arts groups in the Southern New Jersey region and in its use of the metaphor methodology in order to facilitate a fully developed picture of the Web and nonprofit organizations. This is intended to help administrators become aware of the need for strategic use of e-collaboration via creation of a regional theatre Web presence for South Jersey that enacts a more evolutionary metaphor, perhaps that of the organism. Theatres are encouraged to practice collaborating on the Web by creating reciprocal links and thus cooperating as a region.

Keywords: e-collaboration; electronic commerce; management issues; metaphors; nonprofit organizations; online community; theatres; virtual alliance

INTRODUCTION

Web presence is the perception of influence and organizational identity that organizations attempt to create in their customers and Web site visitors. Used as a strategic positioning instrument, Web presence goes well beyond the basic graphics, text, and hyperlinks that are the building blocks of a Web site. The Web presence of the organization should have
a positive effect on its operations, meaning that these operations should be made easier, faster, and more efficient and effective. An organization’s competitiveness is expected to be sharpened through a strong Web presence so that it will gain additional market share, expand operations into new markets and attract additional customers (Abuhamdieh, Kendall, & Kendall, 2000, 2002).

Developing an organizational Web presence is expected to enhance the organization’s adaptation and growth by enhancing its relationship with its customers. This will make the organization more alert to its customers’ needs and expectations. This is expected to have a positive effect on the organization’s growth prospects.

Nonprofit organizations traditionally lag behind commercial enterprises in their approach to implementing integrated information technology, particularly in the area of developing a strategic IT plan. This occurs for a number of reasons, but they include the lack of expertise and knowledge concerning the importance of information technology to an organization (specifically in the performing arts community); the lack of a predictable source of funding for endeavors that are earmarked as exclusively for IT development; and the reticence to include IT as a funding priority when grant requests are made. Additionally, many funding agencies specifically will not grant requests for standard items required to build IT infrastructure, such as computers, software, and expertise to develop information systems and IT policy. Because of these concerns, oftentimes information technol-

gy enhancements are not even broached (Te’eni & Kendall, 2004).

I chose to look at an exhaustive list of regional theatres that have a Web presence in Southern New Jersey (affectionately known to locals as “South Jersey”). South Jersey is made up of eight counties with a population of about 2,300,000 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003). This fairly densely populated region can support a number of different theatre groups, but the theatres are spread over the region.

A report published in 2000 that examined the economic impact of arts funding in New Jersey a decade ago found that $18 million in NJSCA funding resulted in $1 billion of annual economic activity in New Jersey. Their findings showed that during that time, there was more than $546 million in direct spending by arts groups and more than $474 million in ancillary spending by visitors. This generated $27 million in tax revenue; more than 17 million audience members, including 4.5 million school children; more than 11,000 jobs involving more than 47,000 artists and more than 700 arts groups (Arts Mean Business: A Study of Economic Activity, 2000; NJSCA/ArtPRIDE, 2000).

It is with this in mind that I considered examining how theatres currently use their presence on the Web, recommending how they can improve their service by changing their Web metaphors and how they can cooperate and collaborate with other theatres in the region.

**METHODOLOGY**

Original research to identify nonprofit theatres located in South Jersey was done
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