

Marketing Broadway: Selling Hope for a Song

Patricia Cohen

Although Broadway, like pretty much every other industry, is taking its lumps this season, some theater veterans are hoping that as portfolios go down, the appetite for entertainment will go up.



Michael Falco for The New York Times

Some Broadway shows are hitting the streets, promoting themselves with sandwich boards and fliers offering discount tickets.

That view is part of what is prompting Disney to alter its marketing to fit the mood. A recent television advertisement for “Mary Poppins,” one of three Disney shows on Broadway, featured enthusiastic customers talking about the musical being “so full of hope for the family, for better times ahead.”

David Schrader, executive vice president of Disney Theatrical Productions, explained, “We’re adjusting the message to include comfort in addition to escapism.”

The original P. L. Travers book, “Mary Poppins,” which was quickly followed by several sequels, was published in 1934, during the Depression, he noted, and the ads are intended to remind viewers “that family is more important than money.” The testimonials emphasize that “when times are challenging, this is a feel-good moment,” he said.

The new commercial is just one of several adjustments Disney has made to its marketing strategy in recent weeks, including a shift in advertising dollars to television from print, and a children-go-free promotion for all its shows (the others are “The Lion King” and “The Little Mermaid”) that begins soon after the new year.

When it comes to a Broadway show, there aren’t many ways to cut costs, Mr. Schrader said, adding, “You can’t change the product very much, so you’ve got to remind people it’s a real value.” The “Mary Poppins” testimonial also includes customers saying the show is “so well worth the money.” While few productions are changing their strategies as specifically as Disney’s, across Broadway, musicals and plays are trying to focus their marketing budgets more effectively. “We’re trying to make sure that every dollar spent brings a ticket sale back,” said Drew Hodges, chief executive of SpotCo, an advertising agency representing many Broadway shows.

Hugh Hysell, president of the promotions and marketing company HHC Marketing, which often works with SpotCo, said: “Entertainment has always been there as a form of escape. Our job is to let people know that in terms of the experience, you get much more value for the money.”

For “Monty Python’s Spamalot,” Mr. Hysell said, the ads mention “hundreds of laughs, 27 fabulous songs, 400 costumes,” and make the point that, “If you’re going to choose only one thing to spend your money on, this show can give you that experience you’re looking for.”

Discounts remain an important lure in tight times. "Pricing on Broadway is much more flexible than it might appear," Mr. Hodges said. Tickets range from \$20 to upward of \$200 for premium seats, but most are \$45 to \$100, he said. Discounts online or through direct mail can also be increased according to demand. "The Phantom of the Opera" has a half-price sale for advance tickets bought for performances in January through March, the theater industry's slowest months.

And some new shows like "Shrek: The Musical" and "Guys and Dolls" are even offering discounts before opening night, a rare practice for big-budget musicals. The idea is to create buzz. As Mr. Schrader often remarks, "The No. 1 reason people tell us they pick a show is word of mouth."

For "Alfred Hitchcock's The 39 Steps," HHC has people in sandwich boards traipsing around Times Square to entice visitors who might buy tickets to a discounted show on impulse. "The directive changes each day, depending on how many tickets are sold," Mr. Hysell said. "A team can carry two different sets of fliers, depending on how we're doing at the box office." On a Tuesday night, for example, the discount price is usually \$49 a ticket; on weekends it's \$59 or \$69.

There is no one-size-fits-all strategy, everyone agrees. Are you selling a long-running show or a new one? Musical or drama? Are you trying to attract younger viewers?

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