

All The World's A \$ Stage... Like actors, staff needs to prepare, 'rehearse'

Key to the Door Weekly

August 1, 2012

By Dave Maier

I'd be way more hesitant to write about the business of theatre if it just wasn't so darn interesting. Though a board member regularly counsels me to the contrary..."Go easy, Tiger – nobody buys tickets to watch you build a spreadsheet."

But as it turns out, the wider world is coming around. The bleeding edge of business marketing these days is all about "Customer Experience Management," and the movement's bible is "The Experience Economy," by B. Joseph Pine II and James H. Gilmore. The gist of which is... Business is a stage - Work is theatre – Employees are performers - Actors prepare.

The authors suggest all business owners and leaders ask themselves, "What would we do differently if we charged admission?" Finally, companies like Apple, LEGO, MGM Resorts, Virgin Airlines and Microsoft are catching up with American Folklore Theatre in taking responsibility for the customer experience and the lasting value it can create...

"Theatre is not a metaphor but a model for human performance in staging experiences," explain Pine and Gilmore. Does this suggest that theatre managers will soon become the next gurus of the business-marketing universe? Why yes, it does.

So an established and successful theatre operation like AFT ought to have this holistic business-as-performance perspective fairly mastered, right? Turns out even we have a ways to go.

To the public, a theatre's obvious primary "product" is the performance. In that respect, this summer's record sales suggest we're doing something right. But memory is fickle. Often some service touch-point, good or bad, will have as much to do with a customer's ultimate satisfaction as the show itself.

The biggest faction of AFT's work force is our volunteer base. Last year, 271 volunteers donated 4,659 hours of their time to making AFT go - that's over \$100,000 of labor value these folks add to the organization each year! But even more important, for most patrons most of the time, our volunteers are the face of the company. If all the world is indeed a stage, how do we "rehearse" this cast of hundreds? All of us at AFT take tremendous pride in the quality, devotion and professionalism of our volunteers. The least we can do is make sure they have a decent script, the right props and some good direction.

"Managers need to give employees roles to play, help them characterize those roles, and especially invest time in rehearsing before placing them on the business stage," suggest Pine and Gilmore. We also need to recognize and foster the creative insight that employees and volunteers bring to fine-tuning their own roles. These folks always provide the best ideas anyway.

So we've begun the careful work of reviewing and redefining our many specific volunteer roles, developing protocol and helpful language. But customer service is best when it is fresh and authentic. It's not practical to attempt to provide a policy or set response for every scenario that might arise. It also makes sense to develop a guiding principle or service mission of sorts. A place to come from - for those oddball and impromptu situations that a manual can't begin to address.

It's a work in progress, but here's what we came up with...

"At AFT, we take responsibility for the entire patron experience. We embrace the challenge of creating lasting and rich family memories. AFT celebrates relationship and connection, and we encourage a sense of familiarity with our audience. We treat people with kindness and generosity, and we enjoy sharing a good laugh.

We give people the benefit of the doubt. When issues arise we shape our response by prioritizing safety first, and always strive to make "greatest-good" choices that benefit the entire audience. If a patron has a special request, we do everything we can to say, "YES!" - to go the extra mile. Patrons will always know we're thankful that they chose to spend time with us."

For our senior volunteers, for our amazing box office and house management staff, this only reflects what they strive to do each and every day. And for the uninitiated, it's not a bad place to start.



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