



Understanding service experience in non-profit performing arts: Implications for operations and service management

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Abstract

Recent research in the non-profit performing arts has shown that marketing efforts designed to increase revenue from ticket sales are not achieving the results required to sustain the performing arts. This paper applies operations management analytical techniques to the non-profit performing arts to increase understanding of operational issues and inform service management strategy. The paper takes a two-study idiographic approach. Implementing a modified version of service transaction analysis (STA), Study One describes a performing arts service from provider and customer perspectives, identifies service gaps and develops an elaborated service description incorporating both perspectives. In Study Two, building on the elaborated service description and extant research, in-depth interviews are conducted to gather thick descriptions of predictors of satisfaction, value and service quality as they relate to repurchase intention (RI). Technical, functional and critical factors required to improve organizational performance are identified. Implications for operational strategy, service design and service management theory for this context are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Decreased government financial support and increased competition for donors, grants and sponsor

support (Sullivan Mort et al., 2003) have increased the pressure on cultural arts organizations to raise funds from ticket sales to improve financial returns on show performances. Rentschler et al. (2002) suggest the primary objectives of cultural arts organizations must focus on audience development and increased ticket sales to achieve improved profitability and performance. It is evident however, that past and present marketing efforts focusing on subscriptions, venue management and attendance are not meeting organi-

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zational profit performance objectives and new strategies need to be identified (Cutts and Drozd, 1995; Rentschler et al., 2002).

Recent studies have profiled performing arts audiences and attendance motivations (Bouder-Paillet, 1999; Cuadrado and Molla, 2000) but these studies have focused primarily on social hedonism, intellectual enrichment, and arousal of emotions more relevant to the highly involved committed arts consumer (Broderick and Mueller, 1999), the culturally elite and experiential consumption. Highly involved arts consumers fall into two categories of involvement. The first are those who have an enduring level of personal relevance to the performing arts. These patrons are committed and attached (Jain and Srinivasan, 1990; Broderick and Mueller, 1999) to the performing arts. The second are those with a high level of hedonic involvement. These patrons are emotionally attached and demonstrate a strong need for emotional attainment (Laurent and Kapferer, 1985; Broderick and Mueller, 1999). As competition for patronage in the leisure and entertainment sector intensifies, the cultural arts might be threatened if it operates solely in these narrow elitist artistic and cultural domains. The cultural arts must adopt a broader market definition of potential consumers to compete for the same entertainment dollar as sport, movies, cuisine and other entertainment pursuits. Arts organizations no longer can define their service offering based solely on the subjective motivations of culturally aware theatre buffs and loyal arts enthusiasts (Cuadrado and Molla, 2000). They must understand how a broader market derives satisfaction and value and decides to re-consume. When this is understood, organizations can design and deliver a service offering which will assist in increasing performance through re-consumption.

This paper reports research guided by the question: how does the potential performing arts consumer market observe and evaluate the performing arts service experience and the process of service delivery within this sector and form the intention to re-consume/repurchase? A resolution of this question will improve our understanding of the relationship between technical (show) and functional delivery (Grönroos, 1990) service aspects and consumer satisfaction judgments that drive reconsumption. In order to resolve this question the service offering and exchange

must be examined. Service transaction analysis (STA) has been developed as a technique to achieve rigorous examination of service offerings by combining both information from the managerial voice and the customer view of the experience, both of which provide insight into shared perceptions and critical mismatches (Johnston, 1999). STA combines both the provider and customer perception of the front stage service offered (Grove and Fisk, 1988) highlighting gap one incidence (Berry et al., 1990). Berry et al. (1990) created the *conceptual model of service quality* to articulate the mismatched perceptions of *expected service*, delivery, quality and communication and *offered service*, design, delivery, quality and communication. This analysis focuses on identifying the misperceptions in the customer, service provider dyad.

The desired outcome of the initial stage of STA resembles this process and identifies gap one analysis. Gap one findings reflects the difference between the customer's expected service and the organizational perception of the customer's expected service. Once this is achieved, STA identifies the frontstage interactions and these are measured using a scale questionnaire gauging consumers' reactions to the performance of particular factors. This research uses a modified STA approach. First, it conducts provider and consumer consultant interviews (Johnston, 1999) to gain an understanding of the service offering as seen by the organization and the service experience as seen by the customer. It then deviates from the classic STA approach of scaled questionnaires by using in-depth consumer interviews to gather rich, thick descriptions of customer drivers of satisfaction and re-consumption. Using consumer interviews to gather thick descriptions of intangible issues and perceptions of performance reveals issues not easily disclosed using other research approaches (Patton, 1990).

This paper proceeds by first describing research on experiential consumption and the performing arts. Literature on service experience, customer satisfaction, service quality, repurchase intention (RI) and their interrelationships are then examined. Approaches to analysis appropriate to this context are reviewed. Next, the research method, analysis, results and discussion of two empirical studies are presented. The paper then provides managerial reflections for the performing arts and finally discusses areas for future research.

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