

# What is Your Production Cost-Saving IQ?

Weed out those money-sucking, time-stealing and all-around bad habits that rob your production efficiency

BY IAN STOKELL

**A**S WITH MOST THINGS IN BUSINESS, AND ESPECIALLY A business as fickle as the arts, the key to saving money is good planning. But, to begin, even the most meticulous planning would be wasted if there wasn't a comprehensive effort to collect as much relevant data upon which planning decisions can be made.

However, decisions made based on the wrong data can be worse than no decision made at all. So how do you accumulate the right information upon which to make crucial planning decisions?

## INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATIONS ARE KEY

According to Don Telford, president and CEO of San Diego Theatres, including the Civic Theatre and the historic Balboa Theatre, it's all about "...asking lots of questions, exploring options, offering suggestions, and generally working with diverse interests to see where there are opportunities for sharing costs, efforts, and resources without short-changing anyone's needs or requirements. It is all in the advance planning, communication, and juggling lots of balls in the air without allowing any to drop or fall through a crack."

Information and communications are the name of the game. Says Tom Schek of Dean Evans & Associates, "It's all about information! Recording it, tracking it, analyzing it, and sharing it."

And the ability to share that information via e-mail is a tremendous innovation. Says Fine Arts Software's Tom Gaitens, "Arts organizations are starting to take advantage of the improved communication afforded by the Internet Age—even just disseminating information via email lists to members, staff and board can improve efficiency and reduce error."

The Internet also has other communications uses. According to Schek, implementing a powerful resource scheduling system and giving all theatre parties access to a Web-based calendar can derive huge benefits.

An accurate, easily-updated calendar with flexible security settings, which allows distributed calendar management, saves time for everyone. And while inputting data at the outset into any software takes time, it will be repaid many-fold when the same information has to be tracked and retrieved later.

## STICKING TO THE SCHEDULE AND A LONG LEAD TIME

However, it's one thing to have everyone see the schedule, but it's an entirely different story making them adhere to it. Says Mark Carley

of Federal-Mogul, "From my experience, adhering to the original schedule is a major issue during rehearsals. For example, people aren't off book when they should be and props aren't available on the date agreed to. Producers and directors need to develop the skill of keeping people on time and on task."

With regards to scheduling, Schek says that, "Ironically, one of the keys to looking ahead is the ability to look back. The availability of facility and resource utilization data from an event management software system can be the key to planning productions and scheduling the space, equipment and human resources required to present them successfully."

Planning events a long time in advance is also crucial. Says Telford, "Our events are typically booked months to years into the future. This provides a luxury of being able to see what's coming down the pike, while doing the critical focus on advancing the near term engagements."

Having a long lead time can help generate income from other avenues as well. Says Carley, "We have a fairly set calendar. We schedule about nine months before the season starts. We then make adjustments to the schedule when we think we have high revenue potential (for example when a more commercially viable play is added to the season). This has forced us to better manage the usage of our playhouse. This is a good thing, as the playhouse represents our capacity, and we need to be more vigilant in making sure it is available as revenue-making opportunities arise."

## RESOURCE-SHARING AND REVENUE GENERATION

In times of economic hardship every little cost saving can help. Partnering up with other local theatres for resource sharing can pay dividends, and can even entail revenue-sharing if the resource has enough value. In addition to improving profitability, such arrangements can also bring new audiences to the theatre.

Even with a small local theatre, it is important to look on the facility as more than just a place for a small group of like-minded people to rehearse and present shows. Says Carley, "Thinking of our theater as a revenue-generating asset, rather than as a clubhouse, has helped us use the space more effectively. It forces us to limit rehearsal time and other non-income generating activities. We continue to improve in the organization of props, costumes and set pieces. This saves time and money, as it becomes easier to see what we have in stock and minimizes what we have to buy new for each show."

## SOFTWARE TOOLS FOR DATA MANAGEMENT

Software can play a key role in harnessing all the relevant data. While Carley sees Microsoft Project as a useful tool for planning a production, Schek likes the Event Management System (EMS) suite of facility scheduling and Web calendar products designed to increase scheduling efficiency, optimize resource utilization and streamline communication both internally and with the public.

Penny Tabor, IT manager for the Midland Center for the Arts, also uses EMS software with the Meeting Matrix room diagramming add-on software application. Says Tabor, "Having one complete system that all staff can access to schedule and view events is vital for our business. We use the standard Setup Worksheet report every day to generate a Daily Calendar of Events that gets distributed to all staff for review. In addition

to the variety of standard reports included in EMS, we appreciate the flexibility in being able to customize our own reports.” For the Center, which also rents out rooms in addition to supporting its arts and performing groups, even the three parking lots have now been added to the Meeting Matrix system.

### TIME SAVING IS COST SAVING

In business generally, time-saving equates to cost-saving. The same can often be said for theatre or arts center management.

For Carley, with a background in manufacturing, cost-saving is related to inventory and capacity. “Your capacity is defined by the size of your house and its availability,” he says. “Most of us are not likely to increase the size of the house without a huge capital investment. So, you have to look at increasing availability.”

All theatres should try to ascertain how many nights the facility can be made available for income-producing activities such as renting out the space. Once a set number of nights are integrated into the season’s schedule, a sales campaign to sell the space can be initiated.

Carley says that businesses should minimize their inventory, having just enough to satisfy customer demand; and theaters should think of rehearsal time as inventory. A play should have just enough rehearsal time to produce a good show, but no more. The rehearsal time saved could be utilized to create revenue for the theatre.

For Schek, one of the keys to cost-saving is to use a powerful, adaptable facility and resource scheduling system. A set of reminders should be defined that can be applied to a space “booking” as soon as it’s made and which will alert staff when a task is due. Automated notifications that can alert staff when an element of a booking has been changed should also be initiated. Such a system should also define and track the use of the theatre’s resources, such as equipment, supplies and staging.

Gaitens adds that putting on a play involves following a process. The more that process can be refined and standardized, the more both cost and exposure to error can be reduced. “That means thinking through the process,” says Gaitens. “Far too often in the arts our processes are designed by habit, and then just passed along from production to production, year to year. But if you dispassionately examine your processes, it’s not too hard to identify areas of improvement.”

Gaitens believes time-saving is a tough concept for the arts as a whole to embrace. But there are definite benefits to time-saving. To begin with, saving time producing a performance creates space in the organization’s schedule for growth, reflection and planning.

Adds Gaitens, “It’s also the professional thing to do—everyone’s time is valuable and wasting any of it is disrespectful and costly. Also, part of the reason we’re all under-paid in the arts is because we’re overworked. Work two fewer hours each week and you’ve given yourself a raise.”

### EXPERIENCE CAN HELP AVOID DUPLICATION OF EFFORT

Taking advantage of experience, so mistakes are not repeated, can save considerable time and money. Not having to redo work because of a lack of communication between departments should be a priority. With good communication and planning, duplication of effort can be averted.


Says Telford, “At the Balboa Theatre, most events use house lighting. So as shows are advanced, it is determined where there may be overlaps in the lighting needs so that electricians might be hung to accommodate multiple engagements rather than just dealing with a single show at a time.”

Correct planning can minimize change-overs. Adds Telford, “At the Civic Theatre...if we have to clear seats to create the mixing location in the house, we look to the other upcoming shows to try to minimize when the mix location has to be struck and the seats re-installed. There may be intervening events that don’t need the mix location but due to low ticket sales don’t really need to have those seats re-installed. We try to capitalize on opportunities to minimize change-overs for enhanced efficiency and cost savings.”

Implementing an effective resource and scheduling management system and the use of modern communications technologies such as email and a Web-based calendar allow for more efficient theatre management practices.

And in the current economic downturn, effective pre-planning of a season lets any arts organization eliminate the duplication of work and squeeze maximum mileage out of increasingly scarce resources. **db**


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