

Beyond the neck: a word-of-mouth success story

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Premiering a new Australian play by an unknown writer is a hard sell. When Tasmania Performs chose to present Tom Holloway's play Beyond the Neck, it was a leap of faith in the power of word-of-mouth to generate a buzz. The result? A season sellout before opening night. How did they do it?

**How a small company used networking to achieve full house on an empty budget
The challenge**

Premiering a new Australian play by an unknown writer and cast is a hard sell. But it's even tougher for a young company without a recognisable brand. Tasmania Performs, a performing arts initiative established last year, accepted that challenge when it chose to present a new play in Tasmania this month by Tom Holloway, *Beyond the Neck*, based on interviews with survivors of the Port Arthur massacre.

It was a risk worth taking. The play's success exceeded even producer Annette Downs' expectations.

"We sold out all four performances in Hobart in advance of opening," she says. "I've been in Tasmania 15 years and in my experience that's never happened before."

To meet demand, the eight-show season was extended in Launceston and stair seats were sold. Complimentary tickets were scarce.

Downs relied on a word-of-mouth marketing campaign to generate pre-show sales and overcome the marketing challenge: to promote a new play about a sensitive topic close to the hearts of many Tasmanians, without household name stars or the support of a local professional theatre culture.

"There hadn't been a fully professional independent Tasmanian work produced for about 10 years," says Downs. "When something good comes to town it often doesn't sell well because there's no culture of seeing new work. So when you are creating new work it's really hard to sell. I knew I could take out a full page advertisement in the paper and it wouldn't sell. I could have taken out press ads every day and it wouldn't have sold this show."

The strategy

Downs believed a word-of-mouth marketing campaign was the only way forward. Her strategy consisted of four key steps: using her own media profile (a weekly segment on Local ABC Radio discussing arts events) and personal relationships and business networks to spread the word about *Beyond the Neck*; identifying advocates who were able to influence the target audience; seeking the advice of two public relations experts; and executing the media/publicity campaign.

Like all word-of-mouth campaigns, it was low cost, fast, highly targeted and personalised. Its success was contingent on the integrity of both the play and marketing message, and Downs' reputation too.

"I have to be highly selective about what I book. You can only use this model (word-of-mouth) when you have a winner. I knew the script was rock solid," she says. Downs' weekly five-15 minute state-wide radio segment acted as the campaign's first building block. "I'm promoting everybody's work, so when I called people six months later asking for support, they were happy to give it. It's forcing a mutuality," she says.

Another crucial early step was enlisting the support of several influential advocates who could help spread the word and create a buzz about the play. Given the play's short season, Downs knew that word-of-mouth support had to be generated before the play premiered. To do this, she identified and then invited leading arts advocates in Hobart to see an excerpt of the show and learn about the play's genesis.

Downs outlined the key message she hoped to communicate to potential audiences: that *Beyond the Neck* was a new Tasmanian play by a professional theatre company; the subject had been handled sensitively; and the show was likely to sell out because there would only be four productions in Hobart and four in Launceston.

"I had no idea whether the show would sell out or not. I literally just put out a Chinese whisper and I think it worked," says Downs.

"It was like a virus went out from that meeting. One of the advocates I'd invited was going to host a City Mission fundraiser the same night and he put a flyer for the play at each person's table place. Another advocate distributed flyers to the choir of the musical CATS, and one handed them out to members of a dance group. Instead of sitting in cafes, my DL (flyer) was being passed on by the advocates."

The third and possibly most important step in Downs' strategy was to draw on the support of two public relations experts. Having scant knowledge of PR campaigns, Downs asked for help from the Theatre Royal's Lou Cox and IS theatre's Magda Grubski, who in just one meeting advised her on how to formulate and execute a media campaign. They provided Downs with a media list, including names and addresses, and gave her feedback on the design and content of the play's promotional material.

"I picked their brains, listened hard and I did exactly what they said. Their feedback was always spot on. I got great advice from great people."

Downs employed a part-time publicist with local contacts and good personal and business networks in the arts to run the campaign in Launceston.

"She was able to do in five hours what it would have taken me months to do," she says.

She chose not to advertise the play in the media because she believed it was too costly and ineffective. But she was able to secure editorial coverage in both the print and broadcast media in the days before the play opened.

Beyond the Neck was one of five chosen for presentation at the Royal Court Theatre in London this year, and the playwright Tom Holloway, a Tasmanian who was moved by the events at Port Arthur in 1996, was an articulate media spokesperson.

Says Downs: "We were able to promote the local boy made good story. Tom's been very generous with his time. He's spoken to every person and done every radio interview I can line up for him and he's given workshops at secondary school colleges. Everyone is impressed by him as a communicator and by the integrity of his tale."

Downs says the editorial coverage helped secure bookings. In the few days following a 20-minute segment about the play on ABC's Stateline program, 90 tickets were sold.

Tasmania Performs distributed 10,000 print flyers (5,000 in Hobart and 5,000 in Launceston), electronic flyers and personalised emails to target groups such as drama schools and writing groups to promote the play before opening night. It also used existing electronic networks to spread the word.

"There's a local network of about 2000 passionate theatre lovers that's been under the radar," says Downs.

"One of my advocates, David Walch, spread the word in this way. When I got up the morning after opening night, he had already emailed the network to say what a great show it is. How can you top that? It's about connecting the various communities."

Summing up

To run a successful word-of-mouth campaign you need time and energy, and you need to be able to show your appreciation to your advocates and all those people who support and trust you, she says. "One thing I've learned is the next time I tour a production, I will find out who the 'me' is in each town and devote part of my budget to that. The campaign has been very labour intensive. I've been working as a publicist at least 16 hours a week for probably six weeks, and that's solid hours."

Downs has tried to ensure that everyone who has helped has felt appreciated. The advocates received complimentary tickets to the opening night performance and will be updated on the play's future progress,

and those who gave advice freely and generously, such as the publicity experts, will be thanked appropriately. "It's about the integrity of your relationships and doing what you say you'll do and delivering on time. You need to respond to everyone's needs."

Other examples of successful word-of-mouth marketing campaigns

AUSTRALIA

Nudie Juice

The marketing campaign featured gimmicks such as the Nudie hot air balloon and adopt-a-shop program, encouraging patrons to do a shop to Nudie headquarters if they didn't keep shelves adequately stocked.

INTERNATIONALLY

The Passion of the Christ

The film was launched with a concentrated word of mouth campaign aimed at a religious audience.

Books

Books that became bestsellers thanks to word of mouth recommendations include

- The Da Vinci Code
- The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night and
- Captain Corelli's Mandolin.

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References

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