

Attracting University Students To Campus Performances

A Look at Preferences in a Young Adult Potential Audience

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The University of Cincinnati's College-Conservatory of Music (CCM) is a "church without a local congregation." It enjoys national prestige in such areas of performance as classical music, opera, jazz, percussion, drama, musicals, and dance. It has the stature within the Cincinnati region to draw large audiences, and yet it attracts only small numbers from within the University community. In view of CCM's educational mission, CCM has been particularly interested in raising student attendance. Of the UC student population of 33,000 students, total student attendance was only 4,590 (14%) in 1995-96.¹ Given the likelihood that some of these students attended a CCM performance more than once and that not all of the students were UC students, the actual number of UC students attending CCM events was probably even smaller than 14%. Poor turnout occurred despite the fact that in the 1995-96 academic year CCM increased its outreach efforts to attract students.

This past summer, **Dr. David Curry** and I set up a marketing research project to explore the potential for attracting UC students to CCM performances. Students in Dr. Curry's Marketing Research class assisted on the project. The recommendations which the research yielded may be helpful to other colleges in attracting students to their events and perhaps to other cultural organizations seeking young adults. It must be pointed out, however, that our findings are only exploratory in nature due to the small sample size of 51 question-

naire respondents and 15 focus group respondents. Although significant patterns began to emerge, findings based on small samples are not appropriate for broad generalizations or statistical projections.

Objectives

1. The research team decided to study student entertainment tastes and habits – not in order to advocate changes in the selection or presentation of CCM's current offerings, but in order to identify the kinds of entertainment that would potentially attract students.
2. We also wanted to determine the right price levels and performance schedules that would appeal to University students, as well as other information for effective packaging of CCM events (e.g., what kind of atmosphere, social environment, and add-ons such as post-event receptions would attract students).
3. We sought facts for effective advertising to UC students – not only their sources of entertainment information, but also their decision-making process for selecting entertainment. Advertising to students who make entertainment plans a week ahead should probably be different from advertising to students who make last-minute, spontaneous decisions.
4. Lastly, we wanted to discover whether student attitudes, habits, and decision-making reflected distinctions by gender, graduate vs. undergraduate status, part-time vs. full-time status, and campus resident vs. commuter status.

MARKET
RESEARCH

Methodology

Primary Research

Instrument: a 15-20 minute intercept. Interviews were conducted at student lounges and other student gathering areas around campus. Since attitudes and intensity of feeling were essential to meeting the research objectives, the intercept questionnaire included scaled questions and open-ended questions. We followed these structured interviews with a focus group to clarify attitudes and preferences as needed.

Student Categories: We took the precaution of getting a representative demographic distribution of students. Questionnaire respondents were 55% male and 45% female, 68% undergraduate and 32% graduate students, and 61% commuters and 39% campus or campus-area residents. Respondents were primarily performing arts majors, business majors, and liberal arts majors. Focus group respondents were medical students, 10 male and five female. Only full-time students enrolled in the 1995-96 academic year were interviewed.

In order to know whether demographic elements influenced results, we tabulated each survey question four times: for overall response, for undergraduate vs. graduate response, resident vs. commuter response, and female vs. male response. Findings are available in a 96-page printout, but, in summary, we found very little demographic discrepancy in responses.

Results

A. Tastes In Entertainment: This Generation X Subset Is Ripe For Recruitment

The University of Cincinnati students' favorite forms of organized entertainment (i.e. produced as opposed to spontaneous entertainment) are movies (50 out of 51 responses), rock concerts (48/51), and plays (47/51). The stated reasons for these preferences are that they favor entertainment that offers plenty of variety (43/51), arouses their emotions (42/51), and lets them unwind (43/51). Only 12/51 like audience participation, at least when it is imposed upon them. Comparatively few claim to like classical music concerts (18/51), although a majority enjoy entertainment that engages them intellectually (33/51). The focus group respondents shared these preferences and motivations

and expressed particular interest in musicals. The focus group respondents also shed light on the disinterest in classical music: it is so "foreign to us" as to bear "almost a stigma to our generation." As one respondent explained, "The only exposure I had to the arts when I was growing up was what we had in art class and what we had in music class. Past this, I had to learn all the composers, but that was work. That wasn't going to the movies."

This suggests that University students are a likely audience for CCM plays and light variety entertainment, such as musicals and steel band, and not likely audiences for participatory sing-along events such as Feast of Carols or for classical music concerts. Possibly, University students are a potential audience for classical music concerts when those events are "accessible" and "more visual." The attitude seems to be "we don't know symphonies" but would be interested in "music that we know, even if we don't know the name of the composer" such as Pops music, and those pieces that include a strong visual component.²

However, the factors that make CCM entertainment unique are not of major appeal to University students and should not be used to attract students in marketing communications. Students are not hostile to these factors; they just don't see them as a benefit. Respondents were split down the middle regarding seeing people their own age perform (22/51 see this as a plus), attending events that their peers attend (25/51 see this as positive) and attending campus entertainment (19/51 attend University entertainment other than CCM events such as Student Center comedy or readings by guest artists). Focus group respondents explained that, for them, peer

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is synonymous with amateur – “we know how all of us are” – and so it is not an indicator of event quality.

The questionnaire respondents found no particular obstacles to attendance. They were asked if obstacles might be: parking problems (90% said no), ticket prices (96.1%

Student Interests

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said no), no knowledge of events (70.6%) said no, schedule conflicts (86.3%) said no, no free time (88.2% said no), or difficulty in ordering tickets (100% said no). “Are you uninterested in CCM events (e.g., plays, concerts, operas, ballet, musicals)?” – 88.2% said no (were not uninterested in general). The focus group respondents agreed that the ticket prices under \$10 and the scheduling of CCM events seem convenient. Typical, perhaps, of medical students, their chief obstacle to attending campus events was a lack of connectedness to the main campus; they had little knowledge of CCM events or even of where CCM is located. They agreed that “the medical school is isolated.”

We conclude that:

- a) University students are not uninterested in CCM performances in general, that is, there is no “major turn off” associated with CCM or with any of its events except for opera and classical music (as they are currently presented). Nor, except for the problem of the medical school’s lack of information, are they encumbered by any particular constraints to attendance.
- b) Rather, University students are *not yet interested* in CCM performances. There are no hooks that pull them in. The factors we thought were hooks – CCM is part of campus life, peers perform – are not hooks. Moreover, our investigation of students’ artistic preferences must be put in the broader context that the arts are regarded as only one of many entertainment options. As one focus group respondent said, “With everything going on – computers, sports – the arts aren’t a big draw.” Furthermore, the focus group respondents were emphatic and unanimous that their major reason for going anywhere is to socialize: e.g., “we want something interactive”; “We sit in class all day. The last thing we want to do is sit still in some theater.”

We believe that unless CCM correctly positions the products that can potentially attract students, and establishes the right marketing mix, it will lose an audience in its own midst that is ready to be recruited. It will go to the city’s downtown professional organizations that have the right mix.

B. Winning UC Student Audiences: The Marketing Mix

Fortunately, University students are open to attending CCM performances at *least once*, particularly, of course, CCM’s own students. Thirty-five (68.6%) of the 51 questionnaire respondents – including eight CCM students – have attended a CCM event, and all of the focus group students expressed interest in checking out musicals, plays, and the steel band. The goal is to turn University students into regular attenders who bring their friends and spread positive word-of-mouth advertising. Only the CCM respondents attend CCM events regularly, and none of the events attract large enough numbers to indicate a strong pull in and of themselves, without being part of a strong marketing mix.³ What follows is the marketing mix indicated by the research.

1. In Marketing To Students, Position The Performances To Reflect Their Tastes

Recommendation: The product can attract students if it features the characteristics that attract students, and is promoted accordingly. As we have seen, they like movies, rock concerts, and plays; they like entertainment that offers plenty of variety and visuals, arouses their emotions, and lets them unwind. These are the benefits to stress whenever appropriate. One may recall, as an example, that the **Cincinnati Opera** has achieved tremendous marketing success with baby boomer audiences by comparing its productions to movies and rock songs (e.g. the advertising slogan for *Carmen* was “Last Tango in Paris”) and suggesting that, like those forms, the productions are heavy on emotional and visual content. (*Ed. note - the May issue will discuss Cincinnati’s program.*)

2. Prices And Performance Schedules Are Not An Issue, But Accommodating Student Spontaneity Is An Issue

Recommendation: Prices, dates, and performance times are acceptable to University students. A total of 90.2% of the respondents state that prices ranging up to \$10 are affordable for them personally, which suggests that CCM advertising should stress its \$5 and \$8 ticket prices. Conversely, the fact that only 5/51 respondents believe they can afford more than \$10 argues that CCM’s

\$13 student prices for plays and musicals are beyond the students' reach. Focus group respondents emphasized the importance to them of prices under \$10.

Date and performance times elicited no strong feelings from the questionnaire respondents, with barely a majority (26/51) preferring weekends to weekdays. No majority view was expressed on preferred performance times, on preferred performance length. This indifference to performance schedules correlates with the finding that University students tend to act more spontaneously than their elders; dates and times are not as important to students as what is happening when they have the time and inclination to go out. More than 90% (46/51) of the respondents make plans no more than two or three days ahead.

Focus group respondents clarified this planning process. As one respondent explained, "You don't know what you're going to do from week to week or day to day. So, you see [some sign or ad] that afternoon and say, 'Okay, let's do that,' because it's right there; you don't have to plan. You've got a group of people standing around. They see the sign and say, 'Okay, why don't we do that tonight?'"

The focus group respondents who are married commuters agreed that spontaneity is the norm even for them so long as the event does not require an outlay of much money. For example, "When it's a spur-of-the-moment thing, I'm just going to leave a message on the answering machine, but I'm not going to plop down more than five bucks without checking with her first."

Recommendation: To attract students, then, it is probably more effective for CCM to shift some of its advertising dollars from event advertising to distributing calendars, such as its quarterly calendar of major events, in student lounges, dorms, and other student gathering areas. In this way, University students are informed of what CCM has to offer when the impulse for entertainment strikes them. In this context, it is illuminating to recall that close to 30% (29.4%) of questionnaire respondents – and all of the focus group respondents – said they were not informed of CCM events, even though CCM advertises selected events with large ads in the student newspaper and with fliers. Quite possibly, then, the problem is that students aren't learning of events *when*

they feel like going out – reinforcing the recommendation that the emphasis on student advertising should shift from promoting selected events and dates to accommodating their spontaneous decision-making through calendar advertising.

Likewise, CCM needs to accommodate spontaneous decision-making as much as possible through convenient box office hours, ease of ticket purchase, and ease of seat selection, as well as emphasize these features in its advertising. The focus group respondents shared a perception that the arts in general are a "hassle." "You have to kind of schedule in advance. You have to worry about tickets and stuff like that. So, it's a bigger deal than just 'Hey, I'll meet you at Brickyard [Bar].'" A major reason for going to bars, sporting events, or to the movies is that "it's easy":

"One of the nice things about going to the movies is that you know you're not going to be turned away; you can choose where you will sit and stuff like that. But [with the arts], there's that idea that if you go, it may be sold out, or we're not going to be able to sit together. Will tickets be available there? Can you buy them at the door? There are so many unknowns, with each theater doing it differently, you just kind of like go, 'Screw it.'"

3. Atmosphere: Casual Is Preferred

Whether University students are on a date or with a group of friends, they prefer a casual atmosphere. They want to:

- dress casually (only 25.5% want to dress up on a date, 2% want to dress up when out with friends),
- socialize (82.4% on a date, 94.1% with friends),
- have food and drink available (68.6% on a date, 74.5% with friends),

and only on dates is sophistication important (51%). A total of 66.7% say the level of sophistication is unimportant when they are out with friends. The preference of casualness to formality or sophistication correlates with the preference for easily accessible entertainment experiences, cheap prices, and spontaneous choices. Casualness does not mean sloppiness (only 3.9% actually dress down when they go out).

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Student Interests

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The focus group respondents added a qualification to the preference for casualness: that attending the arts is “something that is special.” The perception is summed up by this remark:

“I don’t think it would be wise to change the image of the arts because that’s part of the attraction. I hate to sound high-schoolish here, but it’s kind of a date thing. It’s something that you want to make special, kind of make memorable.”

“Special” means wearing “a nice pair of pants or a skirt,” not a T-shirt and shorts. It means a coffee house atmosphere in the lobby so “you can relax for a minute, sit around a table and socialize.” It doesn’t involve “a refreshment stand like at the Reds game.”

Recommendation: CCM should follow the example of **Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park**, which provides a casual yet hospitable atmosphere in its lobby and promotes this atmosphere successfully to young adults through advertising and special events. While CCM maintains decorum in the behavior of house staff and performers, and boasts beautiful facilities, the atmosphere is informal. The audiences dress casually [as do some of the conductors] in the sense of “a nice pair of pants or a shirt,” conversation is lively during intermission, and gourmet coffee is sold. Although the need for short intermissions precludes letting people get too comfortable, perhaps the Corbett Auditorium lobby can accommodate cushioned benches for people to relax for a minute and socialize.⁴ It is to CCM’s marketing advantage that it can provide this desirable atmosphere far more easily than the downtown arts organizations that are housed in formal halls and cater to the tuxedo crowd.

4. Added Benefits

We asked whether respondents would be more interested in attending UC entertainment if they could meet the performers afterward at a reception. The answer was no (only 10/51, 19.6% said this would increase their interest somewhat or a lot), which substantiates the finding of a general lack of interest in peer performers. But a package offer of a post-performance discount at an area bar or restaurant appeals to 53% somewhat or a lot, and the focus group respondents declared it to be a “great idea.”

Recommendation: A post-performance discount offer is worth exploring because it draws upon the students’ desire to socialize. The way to position the post-performance offer is stated well by one of the focus group respondents: “Then, we can go out afterwards and talk about it.”

C. Advertising

1. Advertising in the Cincinnati Media

We asked respondents where they learn about entertainment options in general. Of the questionnaire respondents, only 35.3% learn frequently or usually from city newspapers (of these, 43.1% from Cincinnati’s main newspaper, the *Enquirer*), only 25.5% learn frequently or usually from the radio (of these, 51% from Q102 [Top 40], 19.6% from WIZF [urban contemporary]), and only 15.7% learn frequently or usually from television (of these, 56.9% from WLWT [NBC] and 21.6% from WCPO [CBS]). The focus group respondents corroborated these findings.

Recommendation: Don’t bother to advertise to students through the Cincinnati media. The reach is too small. If, however, the small reach is acceptable, the best days to advertise are Thursday and Friday, according to focus group respondents, since Friday is their most popular night to go out, and Thursday and Friday advertising accommodates their spontaneous decision-making.

2. On-Campus Advertising

According to respondents, there are typically two on-campus ways they learn about college entertainment: word of mouth from fellow students (64.7%) and the student newspaper, the *News Record* (58.8%). Other means of reaching students about on-campus entertainment have little impact on them.⁵ The focus group respondents identified the inefficiency of using fliers. As one said, “There are so many fliers on the bulletin boards that I’ve never looked at them.”

Recommendation: Student newspaper advertising – with an emphasis on frequency – and widespread campus distribution of CCM’s quarterly calendars of major events can accommodate the student need for accessing information spontaneously. ■

End Notes

¹ Figure based on the number of tickets sold at student rates.

² One focus group respondent explained that visuals alone are not an inducement to attending classical music concerts because visuals are available in more accessible settings. Citing the example of a concert that featured a laser light show as “a major turn off,” he asked rhetorically, “Why would I go to [a symphony] to see a laser show?”

³ Orchestra events 13/35, musicals 11/35, chamber music 8/35, plays 7/35, jazz 6/35, opera 5/35, steel band 4/35, percussion 3/35, choral events 3/35, dance 1/35, Feast of Carols 0/35, world music 0/35.

⁴ On many occasions older audiences have also requested lobby seating.

⁵ Fliers, 33.3%. E-mail, 5.9%. Music Appreciation courses, 3.9%. UC Bookstore electric billboard, 2%. Resident advisor recommendations, 0%.

