

ATTENDING LIVE PERFORMING ARTS EXPERIENCES. WHY AND HOW IS THE DECISION TAKEN?

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Across the last years, researchers around the world have shown a greater inclination towards the arts marketing, acknowledging its importance for the well being of arts organizations. Researches have been conducted for all kind of subjects trying to understand better both phenomena: the audience and the provider. However, these studies have their own particularities as they refer to certain cultures. Therefore, we need to look into our own yard and see whether or not such interests have been raised. Unfortunately, researches conducted in this area, in Romania, are very few. That is why the knowledge regarding the live performing arts audience is actually non-existent and from this fact comes the need of discovering more about this unknown. This paper attempts to make one of the first steps in this direction by exploring the audience's motivations to attend live performing arts events and, moreover, the buying decision process. Why do audiences choose to attend live performing arts events? How they decide for it? Which are the sources of information they use? What makes a live performing arts event be a pleasant experience? Or rather an unpleasant one? These are all questions to which this paper provides answers. The way the author have chosen to answer these matters is by conducting a qualitative research that has the aim to explore the universe of this subject and to denote insights for a better understanding. The best method was considered to be the focus group for its advantage of bringing together people who have something in common – namely their frequency in live performing arts events, and facilitate communication between them in order to discover the needed information. Thus, it has been discovered that audiences' motivations are mainly related to social and esteem needs, that is to say people attend these kind of events from their desire to spend their time in a pleasant manner with the people they like or because attending is „trendy” and makes one look more like a cultivated person. However, their motivations are second by the sources of information they use, namely personal sources (e.g. family or friends) because they seem to be more trustful than others, as well as experiential sources, meaning consumer's own experience that makes him a true expert in choosing. Whatever they have chosen, the live performing arts event may or may not raise their expectations. The reasons for this stand both in the performance itself and the audiences' behavior. In conclusion, this paper aims to encourage the further discovery of the performing arts sector from the marketing perspective.

Keywords: arts marketing, arts consumer, motivation, buying decision process

JEL Classification: M31

I. Introduction

Marketing is a social and managerial process through which individuals and groups obtain the things they need and want, by creating and trading products and value with other groups or individuals (Kotler and Armstrong 2005: 6). Unlike the general perception, marketing can be and is, indeed, applied in a variety of sectors, including the arts; although, at a first view, there seems to be an incompatibility between the two concepts.

Marketing, as it relates to the arts, is not about intimidation or coercion or abandoning an artistic vision. It is not hard selling or deceptive advertising. It is a sound, effective technology for creating exchanges and influencing behavior that, when properly applied, must be beneficial to both parties involved in the exchange (Kotler and Scheff 1997: 30). Therefore, it is common sense to assume that the arts sector is subject to market research. And this is the premise from which this paper starts.

The paper attempts to demonstrate the importance of studying audiences' behavior in the arts sector, namely live performing arts. According to the Ministry of Culture and National Patrimony and National Institute of Statistics, live performing arts category consists of: drama theatres, opera houses, musical comedy and variety theatres, philharmonic and symphonic orchestras, ballet and contemporary dance. The importance of studying the audience of these arts resides in the arts organizations' need of knowing to whom they address to and how should they do this. Moreover, the paper attempts to explore the universe of such an audience and reveal profound insights regarding it.

The main goal of the conducted research is to uncover the in-depth motivations that drive the audience to attend live performing arts events and zoom the entire buying decision process. Therefore, the research aims to answer to questions such as: Where does the audience get the information regarding live performing arts shows? How do they choose it? Which are the aspects taken into consideration when choosing? What makes a live performance be great? What makes a live performance be the worst ever seen?

II. Literature review

Research on audience participation in the arts can be traced back to 1966 in the field of cultural economics. Since that time, many researchers have sought to identify various reasons for participation in the arts, in an attempt to inform arts management and education (Turrini 2006: 44).

Nowadays, this range of reasons is as complex as the definition of „audience” is. The term „audience” can take on a variety of meanings in a variety of contexts – audiences as arts receptors, as stakeholders or as customers (Hill, O’Sullivan and O’Sullivan 2008: 36).

From the „arts receptors” point of view, an audience consists simply of those who experience art. However, from a marketing perspective, this definition is of limited value as it excludes the notion of intention. Still, it may be useful in considering the audience for public art. Public art, such as a sculpture in the centre of the city, may or may not be actively sought by those who see it. It may simply be an expression by the artist which exists in people’s lives, therefore making them members of its audience even in the absence of any intention on their part to view it (Hill, O’Sullivan and O’Sullivan 2008: 37). An audience can also be thought of as comprising all those with whom an individual or organization has some form of communication (audiences as stakeholders). For an arts organization, this may include all those who support the arts in any way or who have an interest in their development (Hill, O’Sullivan and O’Sullivan 2008: 37). However, it is the audience as customers that please best the marketers. According to this approach, the audience is seen as being involved in an transaction with an artist or arts organization. This means that people make choices about the art forms and events that they wish to be involved with and are willing to offer something in return for that participation (Hill, O’Sullivan and O’Sullivan 2008: 37).

So, how people make choices and what are they influenced by?

First of all, audience’s behavior is influenced by five major factors: macroenvironmental trends, cultural factors, social factors, psychological factors and personal factors (Kotler and Scheff 1997: 68). Macroenvironmental trends including social, political, economic and technological forces influence our attitudes, our values, our important decisions (education, career and job choices, investment decisions), and our day-to-day decisions (including how to spend our leisure time). Of the several groups of factors that affect audience behavior, it is the cultural factors – from national identity to membership in small social groups – that exert the broadest and deepest influence. A growing child acquires a set of values, perceptions, preferences and behaviors through the process of socialization into his/her culture(s). Social factors such as reference groups, family, social roles and status affect a consumer’s mind-set and behavior. For instance, reference groups refer to informal primary groups such as family, friends, neighbors, but also to

more formal secondary groups such as religious and professional groups. Within these groups the involvement and attendance patterns are highly influential. Still, people are also influenced by groups they do not belong to. Someone aspiring to be a member of the board of trustees of the local opera society may make large donations and attend special events to cultivate acceptance by the group's members. Psychological factors such as personality traits, self-concept issues and emotions also affect people's attitudes and behavior. For example, personality may be described in terms of self-confidence, dominance, autonomy, deference, sociability and adaptability. Cultural innovators and opinion leaders are likely to be more self-confident, dominant and autonomous than the less innovative people, who may be more deferential and more interested in the social benefits of arts attendance (Kotler and Scheff 1997: 68-81).

Motivation is also a psychological factor, directly correlated with the concept of „need”. In order to understand what needs are, it is vital to refer to Maslow's Hierarchy of Human Needs and its five steps of needs (Fig. nr. 1).

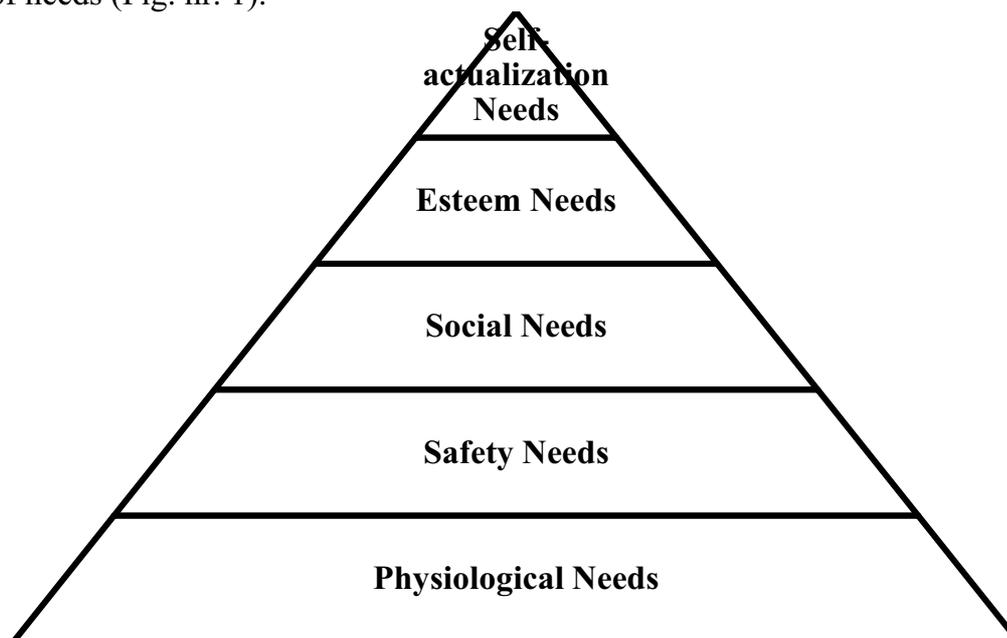


Fig. nr. 1. Maslow's Hierarchy of Human Needs
Source: Processed after (Maslow 1987: 16-22)

Physiological needs (breathing, food, water, sex, sleep, homeostasis, excretion) are the most prepotent of all needs. This means that in the human being who is missing everything in life in an extreme fashion, it is most likely that the major motivation would be the physiological needs rather than any others. A person who is lacking food, safety, love and esteem would most probably hunger for food more strongly than anything else. If all these needs are unsatisfied and the organism is then dominated by physiological needs, all other needs may become simply nonexistent or be pushed into the background (Maslow 1987: 16).

If the physiological needs are relatively well gratified, there then emerges a new set of needs, the safety needs. These include security, stability, dependency, protection, freedom from fear, anxiety and chaos, need for structure, order, law and limits, strength in the protector, etc. The organism may be equally wholly dominated by them. They may serve as the almost exclusive organizers of behavior, recruiting all the capacities of the organism in their services (Maslow 1987: 18).

If both the physiological and the safety needs are fairly well gratified, there will emerge the love and affection and belongingness needs (social needs), and the whole cycle will repeat itself with this new center. The love needs involve giving and receiving affection. When they are unsatisfied, a person will feel keenly the absence of friends, mate or children. Such a person will

hunger for relations with people in general – for a place in the group or the family – and will strive with great intensity to achieve this goal. Attaining such a place will matter more than anything else in the world and he or she may even forget that once, when hunger was foremost, love seemed unreal, unnecessary and unimportant. Now the pangs of loneliness, ostracism, rejection, friendlessness and rootlessness are preeminent (Maslow 1987: 20).

Regarding the esteem needs, all the people from our society have a need or desire for a stable, firmly based, usually high evaluation of themselves, for self-respect or self-esteem, and for esteem of others. These needs may therefore be classified into two subsidiary sets. First, it is the desire for strength, achievement, adequacy, mastery and competence, confidence in the face of the world, and independence and freedom. Second, it is the desire for reputation or prestige (defining it as respect or esteem from other people), status, fame and glory, dominance, recognition, attention, importance, dignity or appreciation. Satisfaction of the self-esteem needs leads to feelings of self-confidence, worth, strength, capability and adequacy, of being useful and necessary in the world. Otherwise, they give the feeling of inferiority, weakness and helplessness (Maslow 1987: 21).

Even if all the above needs are satisfied, we may still often expect that a new discontent and restlessness will soon develop, unless the individual is doing what he or she, individually, is fitted for. Musicians must make music, artists must paint, poets must write, if they want to be ultimately at peace with themselves. What humans can be, they must be. They must be true to their own nature. And this is called self-actualization (Maslow 1987: 22).

Nonetheless, not to be forgotten, a variety of other personal characteristics (personal factors) affect a consumer's preferences and behavior. These factors include the person's occupation, economic circumstances, lifestyle and life cycle stage.

Secondly, the decision to attend a live performing arts event is the result of an elaborated process consisting of five stages (Fig. nr. 2).



Fig. nr. 2. Buying Decision Process

Source: Processed after (Kotler and Armstrong 2005: 286)

The buying process starts when the consumer recognizes a problem or need, which may be triggered by either internal or external stimuli. An internal stimulus may be a desire for an enjoyable, entertaining evening or a desire to support an organization by means of a subscription and a donation. External stimuli include advertisements and word-of-mouth recommendations from friends and colleagues. Knowing which stimuli are more relevant for consumers, may help the marketer to develop marketing strategies that trigger consumer's interest (Kotler and Scheff 1997: 86).

Still, an interested consumer is inclined to search for more information. Consumer information sources may be personal (family, friends, colleagues), commercial (advertising, posters, leaflets, etc.), public (mass-media, award-granting institutions such as „Uniter”) or experiential (based on previous experience with similar products) (Kotler and Scheff 1997: 86-87). However, consumer's selectivity in their information search depends on their ability to process the information, which can be related to experience, age or education (Guillon 2011: 34).

Nevertheless, consumers do not evaluate their alternatives only based on the collected information. The process of evaluation is influenced by the cultural, social, personal and psychological factors described above. So, the consumer sees each product as a bundle of attributes, which have varying capabilities of delivering the sought benefits and satisfying certain

needs. Consumers will differ as to which product attributes are seen as relevant or salient. One person may choose to attend a certain concert because of the symphony being performed, another because she likes a featured soloist, another because she was invited to join friends with whom she wanted to spend the evening (Kotler and Scheff 1997: 87-88).

The decision-making process in arts attendance is made more complex by the fact that the target consumer is often not an individual, but a group. Five different roles may be played by people involved in the decision process: initiator (the person who first suggests or thinks of the idea of becoming involved in a particular exchange), influencer (the person who offers or is sought out for advice), decider (the person who decides whether to take action, what action to take, how, where and when to take action), transactor (the person who completes the transaction) and consumer (who may or may not participate in the actual purchase) (Kotler and Scheff 1997: 89).

After the purchase, the final step in the process is that of the consumer performing a post-purchase evaluation. At this time, the consumer will decide whether their quality expectations have been met or even exceeded, or whether they have been disappointed with the experience (Kolb 2005: 102-103). Yet, a distinction should be drawn between a cognitive approach in which value is the outcome of a cost-benefit analysis with a view to transaction and choice (evaluation before purchase) and an affective or experiential approach in which value derives from a relative preference for the product with a view to consuming or owning the product (evaluation during and after consumption). This dichotomy between value established before purchase and value defined during or after consumption ties in with the distinction between purchase value and consumption value (Bourgeon et al 2006: 36).

III. Research methodology

As mentioned above, the aim of this research is to explore the motivations and the buying decision process related to the attendance of live performing arts events. For this, the author considers that the most appropriate manner is the qualitative research, namely the focus group; as this is considered to be the ideal place to begin understanding what products mean to consumers in their deep psyches rather than their deep pockets (Goebert and Rosenthal 2002: 3).

A focus group is a special type of group in terms of purpose, size, composition, and procedures. The purpose of a focus group is to listen and gather information. It is a way to better understand how people feel or think about an issue, product, or service. Participants are selected because they have certain characteristics in common that relate to the topic of the focus group (Krueger and Casey 2000: 4), in this case their attendance – with a certain frequency, to live performing arts events.

However, the question that is raised is: Why focus groups are a better alternative of exploring and why do they work? The answer is that the intent of the focus group is to promote self-disclosure among participants, as there is the desire to know what people really think and feel. For some individuals, self-disclosure comes easily—it is natural and comfortable. But for others, it is difficult or uncomfortable and requires trust, effort, and courage. Or disclosure may be easy in some settings but not others. Children have a natural tendency to disclose things about themselves, but through socialization they learn the value of dissemblance. Over time, the natural and spontaneous disclosures of children are modified by social pressure (Krueger and Casey 2000: 7-8).

In order to make the choice of focus group as a research method more clear, it would be useful that its main characteristics to be presented. Focus group interviews typically have five characteristics or features. These characteristics relate to the ingredients of a focus group: (1) people who (2) possess certain characteristics and (3) provide qualitative data (4) in a focused discussion (5) to help understand the topic of interest. Focus groups are typically composed of five to ten people, but the size can range from as few as four to as many as twelve. The group must be small enough for everyone to have an opportunity to share insights and yet large enough

to provide diversity of perceptions. Focus groups are composed of participants who are similar to each other in a way that is important to the researcher. The nature of this homogeneity is determined by the purpose of the study. This similarity is a basis for recruitment, and participants are typically informed of these common factors at the beginning of the discussion. The goal of a focus group is to collect data that are of interest to the researcher—typically to find the range of opinions of people across several groups. This differs from other group interactions in which the goal is to come to some conclusion at the end of a discussion—reach consensus, provide recommendations, or make decisions among alternatives. The focus group presents a more natural environment than that of an individual interview because participants are influencing and influenced by others—just as they are in life. The questions in a focus group are carefully predetermined. The questions are phrased and sequenced so they are easy to understand and logical to the participant. Most are open-ended questions. These questions appear spontaneous but are developed through considerable reflection and input. Focus groups work particularly well to determine the perceptions, feelings, and thinking of people about issues, products, services, or opportunities (Krueger and Casey 2000: 10-12).

IV. Research results

The main reasons why people attend live performing arts event are related, preponderantly, with their social and esteem needs. Attending these events is a way of relaxation, of escaping from the cotidian problems; a way of socializing and spending good-quality time with friends; a way of introspecting yourself; as well as a way of confirming one's status as an intellectual person.

The decision of attending a live performing arts event can be taken both on the spot (according to its state of mind or „appetite” for such an event) or following a buying decision process as presented below.

The need recognition is related whether to internal stimuli (mainly the reasons discussed above) or external stimuli (hearing from someone about the worth of an event or seeing an advertisement related to it), both managing to trigger consumer's interest.

When searching for information, consumers use a variety of sources. However, one of the most trustful source is the personal one, namely family, friends or acquaintances that are familiar to the performing arts sector. That is why taking a decision based on their advice it is safe and time efficient, as well. Consumers' own experience is equally important, as they are already accustomed with the process itself. Moreover, the institutions' sites – that host the event, are another reliable source of information. Still, one disadvantage could be the friendless interface of these sites that seem to make consumers more reluctant to its usage. Consumers tend to actively seek for information in free publications such as „24 FUN” or „Sapte Seri”, whether online or offline, while the passive presence of posters for these events does not seem to be appealing enough for consumers nor to drive their attention upon them.

While evaluating their alternatives, consumers pay attention to various aspects, among the most important ones seem to be: the name of the event (e.g. the name of a certain theatre play or symphony or piece of ballet), the distribution/performers (e.g. actors, musicians, dancers) and the director/conductor/choreographer. These „ingredients” tend to assure consumers of the event's quality and, therefore, certify their decision. Apart from these aspects, there others that are taken into account, although not so influential as the previously mentioned ones. The hour the event starts might persuade consumers to go or not, according to the availability of their schedule; the price that in case of lack of discounts (e.g. students, retirees) or desire for a good place in the auditorium may be a demanding one, requiring certain financial resources; the way of purchasing the tickets, if consumers can't go by themselves to buy them or can't purchase them online, they find themselves in the incapability of participating to that specific event.

Furthermore, the purchase decision is rather difficult to be attributed to someone in particular, as attending live performing arts events is a „team sport”, in which everyone plays his role – one

comes with the proposal of attendance, another tries to persuade the others, another one puts the boot in and certifies the attendance, other purchases the tickets and all of them become consumers of that event.

Still, that event may or may not be a pleasant experience for consumers. A positive experience in the live performing arts, from the consumers' point of view, is a successful event. By a successful event consumers understand the following aspects: „performers gave everything they had and made me be part of that experience”, „I was very, very, very impressed after their performance”, „it made me vibrate”, „on my way home I was thinking about the message of that performance”. It seems that a successful performance has the power to change consumers' state of mind: „complete euphoria”, „it has cheered me up”, „emotional achievement”. So, a positive experience implies a communion between performers and audience, as well as a good understanding, communication and mutual respect.

Negative experiences influence profoundly consumers' next decision of attendance. By negative experiences, consumers refer to: „I almost fell asleep”, „I saw errors, abstract things or kitsch”, „a lot of kitsch”, „I did not understand which was the message”, „nothing was coherent in that performance”. In addition, a negative experience is not entirely related to the performance itself, but also to the audience's behavior such as: applause at the wrong time, cell phones ring tones, eating and drinking inside the auditorium in a manner that disturbs the rest of the audience.

Yet, it should be heard in mind that the results from above represent the conclusions of a qualitative study, meaning they are a general view over the matter brought into discussion, providing rather insights than representativeness for the cause. In order to assure the representativeness of these results, a quantitative research should be conducted. Such a research could enrich the actual results by conferring the possibility of classifying the studied aspects according to their importance from the consumer's point of view. For instance, one could know for sure which are the most powerful motivations for attendance? Which are the most relevant sources of information? Which are the most important aspects taken into consideration when evaluating alternatives? All for the sake of improving audience's experience regarding live performing arts.

V. Conclusions

As a final remark, this paper has underlined the importance of the arts marketing for the performing arts sector, as well as the usefulness of research for the same sector. The results of the conducted research are vital for any live performing arts organization who desires to know better the consumer to whom it addresses – which is the trigger for attendance and how does he choose. Such researches have been few so far, in the Romanian expertize literature. Therefore, the author hopes that this paper may be an inspiration for other researchers who want to further explore the performing arts sector from the marketing point of view.

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