

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

AS 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