

Product Differentiation

Marketing is all about selling the goods. It focuses on coming up with ingenious strategies that will captivate the audience and make them want, at all costs, to buy a product. However, as arts organizations and entities, our mere purpose is not to acquire money, but to spread the art we admire and increase the audience that will enjoy it. Nonetheless, there is a very recent trend happening within arts organizations in which they realize their artistry should not only be going into the ultimate production of their effort (let's say a performance or exhibition), but that same creativity and resourcefulness should be utilized when marketing art and attempting to expand the quantity of their audience members. As a result of this epiphany, arts organizations are willing to embrace concepts that have been studied by business and marketing research in order to achieve the utmost possible result.

Through this essay I will focus on the definition of the marketing strategy *product differentiation*. First, I will consider how it fits within the larger spectrum of marketing. Second, I will analyze important considerations to take into account when using this tool. And third, I will describe existing performing arts entities that have successfully applied this strategy.

Before expanding on the subject, it is highly important to take into account the following concepts:

Differentiation	A group of characteristics that define a product to make it stand out from the rest of the items within the same category
Message	The idea or concept an organization is trying to get across
Risk	An action taken that might be dangerous and uncertain for an organization, but is the best option when trying to be innovative and experimental
Strategy	The action plan chosen for an organization to promote itself and reach its target market
Identity	The set of features that an organization or product wants to be known for

The Marketing Perspective

When we speak of product differentiation, it is implied that the characteristics of the product being sold are significantly different from those of a possible competitor. This differentiation may be the result of actual physical or non-physical differences (Dickson & Ginter, 1987). For example, the Laundromat I go to is just as expensive as most, but because it is right next to a coffee shop, I prefer it. On the other hand, the differentiation might be just a perception caused by way the message is shown to the public. When Gmail first started, they offered the same services as other free email accounts, but you had to be invited to join, which automatically gave it more preference, credibility, and exclusivity.

A case often visited by business professors when studying product differentiation is that of Amazon.com. When Amazon.com first started they were the first bookstore to be running online. The ability to click a button on a screen and have a book delivered to your home without even having to put a foot in a bookstore had never been seen before. In a fast-paced world where commodity has become so crucial, a business like this could only flourish. The name even spoke for itself. It was a virtual bookstore with the name of a jungle: it was a jungle of books. This company had every odd in its favor because, for its clients, the possibilities were infinite. Nowadays Amazon.com sells just about everything you can imagine; it has become a place for companies to market themselves, and it is one of the leading companies in the world. Amazon.com is beyond a bookstore, and its initial boost was triggered by the successful use of product differentiation.

The term product differentiation is often confused with *market segmentation*. Market segmentation refers to the research of a specific target market in order to design campaigns that will directly speak to the goal audience. In contrast, product differentiation is an internal process that occurs within an organization. It deals with the identity of the organization. Market segmentation and product differentiation can indeed complement each other by means of using the data acquired through research in order to define what an organization's identity will be. In this way, product differentiation has more to do with *branding* or *rebranding*.

The Arts Perspective

So, how can product differentiation be used within an art organization? The true challenge that art organizations confront nowadays is figuring out how to break out of the stereotypes that come with each art form. Art museums need to be perceived as something other than boring, while ballet and classical music need to avoid being portrayed as “snobs”. An arts organization doesn’t necessarily need to change its purpose or mission, but it needs to reflect on the way their work is being seen by the audience. Each organization must evaluate what their goals are, both in terms of what they want to offer to the public and what kinds of people they want to bring in. Once they have done this, it is crucial that the organization focus on the actual opinions of the audience they are targeting instead of just assuming they know what the audience wants and needs.

In the Wallace Foundation’s report *Building Arts Organizations That Build Audiences*, Susan Parker (2012) tells the story of Fleisher Art Memorial, a visual arts school in Philadelphia. Parker explains that when they were about to turn in their grant proposal, Fleisher realized they had not studied the wants and needs of their audience, so they decided to ask them. After making the appropriate inquiries, they found out that the community didn’t trust them, and that if they included a key person from the community in their outreach movement, getting the rest of the community’s attention, trust and respect would be much easier.

This type of situation can be compared to the way The Mission has worked in the Western Hemisphere. When the Catholics first arrived in the Americas, the Natives were forced to convert to the new religion, and they were obligated to believe in God. However, these days this approach would never work. My family is highly involved with the Christian Mission throughout Latin America and one of my cousins worked for a long time in Guatemala for an organization called Young Life. When I read about the Fleisher Art Memorial’s situation, I recalled her describing to me what she did for a living. Her first step was never to be up front about the message she was trying to carry out. First she had to be accepted by the teenagers, so she would ask to play with them. She would acquire their trust and once this was done, she immersed them in the message she wanted to deliver. By establishing a strong foundation for a relationship, her message seemed less like a sales-pitch.

This type of action is one that arts organizations need to take a tip from. We need to look beyond our own impression of how art will be perceived by communities, and study and research our public, so that they are willing to participate of the activities.

Parker explains this concept in one sentence: “If you want to change your relationship to your audience, you need to consider changing yourself”.

There are multiple organizations that consciously or unconsciously have utilized product differentiation successfully. The channels they have used to achieve it might have been different, but they all strove to stand out from their competitors. The following performing arts related subjects have based their branding on something unique in the industry. I will explore the difference they selected that distinguishes them from others in the following paragraphs.

Imani Winds

Think of the last time you attended a classical music concert. How many people of darker skin tones can you recall? Do you remember any African American person on the stage? How about a Latino? Nothing yet? Sadly, the absence of such minorities (amongst others) in classical music is evident. Whether you are observing the performance of a music school or that of a professional orchestra, the representation of diversity onstage is lacking. This is why, when Imani Winds was founded in 1997, their ensemble was groundbreaking.

When you first look at one of their pictures, you realize they are different from the other woodwind quintets you have observed in the past: there is not a white person in the group. That is the message this New York based ensemble decided to carry out from the beginning. Four of its members are black and one of them is half-Egyptian half-Mexican.

Their imminent movement to enhance the presence of diversity within the classical music world doesn't stop there. Imani Winds doesn't only play the standard music repertoire for woodwind quintet, it focuses its efforts on representing the music of non-Western composers, such as Paquito D'Rivera and Simone Shaheen. Furthermore, Imani Winds has an ongoing Legacy Commissioning Project that focuses on giving chances to composers of underrepresented music. Expanding the woodwind quintet repertoire is a challenge in and of itself, since string chamber ensembles were extremely favored for a long time.

Imani Winds constantly tours around the USA and abroad. In addition to performing in concert-halls, they make it a point to reach out to public schools to educate and inspire the masses with classical music. Their community outreach movement is impressive. At this point in their well-rounded career, they are even able to host a summer camp in New York City every August.



eighth Blackbird

eighth blackbird \ 'ātth 'blak-, bərd\ slang (orig. and chiefly U.S.).

1. verb. to act with commitment and virtuosity; to zap, zip, sock
2. adjective. having fearless (yet irreverent) qualities.
3. noun. a flock of songbirds, common in urban areas since 1996.

Yet another chamber music ensemble that has become renowned because of the uniqueness of their identity is eighth Blackbird. They are a sextet formed by a flautist, a violinist, a cellist, a clarinetist, a pianist and a percussionist. How does such ensemble form, you ask? This group first came together when they were attending school at the Oberlin School of Music in Ohio and decided to play Pierrot Lunaire. Their decision to become a fixed chamber ensemble was quite risk-taking given that, at the time, this was the only composition available for such an ensemble.

Their journey, therefore, became quite experimental. They have commissioned multiple works for this ensemble including some with extended techniques and instrumentation, as well as compositions that include large ensembles with the members of eighth Blackbird as soloists. Because of the innovative nature of their music, their performances stand out from those of the regular repertoire. They memorize their parts, the amount of methods they use with instruments is endless, and they even choreograph their performances. Given that this ensemble is so well-established nowadays, including being awarded three Grammys, they have started breaking up the ensemble in order to perform compositions that include just a couple of the instruments (or even without the instruments) which are just as innovative as the rest. The interaction amongst ensemble players during a performance makes it highly entertaining for the audience. eighth Blackbird has broken molds of classical music and has placed themselves on a well-deserved pedestal within the art music world.



(Le) Poisson Rouge-serving art and alcohol

While we talk about breaking molds, let's look at the New York-based art venue (Le) Poisson Rouge. LPR's vision includes changing the stereotype of an art music and art gallery venue by fusing them with a bar-like environment. Forget about the no-drinks no-food rules of the concert hall, LPR includes a full bar and kitchen to provide you with the goods while you enjoy your concert. While this venue is not exclusive for classical music, it sets the right atmosphere for those musicians that are trying to spread classical music to a different audience.

Many classical musicians have demonstrated concern about such ideas because we have become so used to performing in places that are quiet and reverent. Nonetheless, during a Q&A session, the owners of LPR stated that there have been occasions when a metal band would be playing and people were screaming and jumping up and down, but even if a classical ensemble followed it, the audience knew to quiet down and appreciate this type of artistry differently.

Venues Amenities

- flexible event space fits 250 fully seated, 700 fully standing, or any combination
- 138-capacity soundproof Gallery Bar adjacent to the main space
- 28' x 21' fixed corner stage
- 16' dia. portable, trundled round stage comprised of 3 individual staging sections
- 23' dia. hardwood sprung dance floor
- engineering by John Storyk/WSDG (Electric Lady Studios, Jazz @ Lincoln Center)
- 1 downstage cinema-scale projection screen w/ 5.1 Meyer Surround Sound
- 2 upstage movable projection screens
- Yamaha S6B 7' concert grand piano
- elevated VIP Box & 2 private entrances
- full catering kitchen & planning services
- furnished Green Room w/ en suite restroom



Conclusion

As artists we take pride in our creativity. We take pride in the art we craft and in the art we perform. Unfortunately, this field comes with a reputation that precedes us. The audience members that respect and admire what we do have a solid understanding of our artistry, thus support what we do unconditionally. Consequently, if what an arts organization is not managing to expand its audience members and educate the public on what we do, they are doing something wrong.

In his essay *The Artwork of the Future*, Richard Wagner (Weiss, 2002) explains how art is like a foreign language to somebody that has not experienced making it. They can attempt to understand it, but without the proper background it will sound just like gibberish. He argues that it is the responsibility of artist of all disciplines to work together in strong partnership that they communicate art in a way that even the person that is not an artist himself will understand.

For that reason, using marketing efforts to reflect the ways arts organizations stand out from other organizations is highly relevant. In this point of view, marketing becomes an art form itself. Product differentiation then becomes a highly useful tool that allows you to characterize the identity of your works as something other than your target has seen before, attract their attention, and persuade them to attend your events.

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