

New York City Ballet's Agency Combines Video and Email to Appeal to Younger Audience

Over the past 4 years, Interactive Media Associates (IMA) has contributed substantial marketing expertise to The New York City Ballet (NYCB) using various marketing channels including email marketing. NYCB has grown to become the most prestigious American ballet company, and one of the most prestigious companies in the world. However, like many cultural institutions, it faces declining interest and attendance as younger audiences choose other artistic venues.

Challenges:

NYCB's primary marketing goal is to promote performance sales through subscriptions and individual performance attendance. However, they compete with many other cultural arts organizations for seasonal subscriptions within a declining market. Twice a year, NYCB offers subscriptions to the public when they announce the season's schedule. "In the past, the ballet program would be presented and immediately one-half of the subscriptions would be filled. Unfortunately, the cultural arts have taken a big hit over the years and those subscriptions are not being purchased as readily. Now, NYCB has to make a bigger push to drive individual show ticket sales," said Len Muscarella, President IMA. In addition to the challenge of selling full subscriptions, IMA also needed to promote single performance sales in order to fill the house before the performance date.

Realizing that email marketing could effectively drive ticket sales, IMA also needed to ensure that email marketing would effectively further NYCB's brand image. Through their storied history NYCB has built a strong, vigorous brand image. With email marketing, IMA was tasked to maintain that image without cheapening or lessening the brand.

In addition to upholding NYCB's brand image, IMA was also tasked with designing email campaigns to appeal to a younger audience. Although NYCB has a loyal following, their core audience was slowly growing older and in order to maintain NYCB's market share they had to appeal to a younger audience.

Solution:

IMA implements an email marketing campaign prior to the start of a season to promote subscription enrollment. "We have a 6-week campaign to promote the sign up for subscriptions. In that 6-week period, we may send 5 emails. The closer to the deadline, the stronger the messages get and we'll often offer more promotions to get them to sign on," said Kristen Westfield, Email Marketing Specialist at IMA. In order to strengthen the promotional offers without diminishing the brand, the emails promoted access to exclusive receptions, free champagne during the show, or a sneak peek of a rehearsal. Muscarella noted, "these promotions never 'slashed prices' or cheapened the NYCB brand, but instead allow email recipients to feel privileged to receive such valuable incentives that encouraged them to sign up for a subscription."

To increase ticket sales in a short time frame, email marketing was the most viable option, especially in comparison to direct mail or print advertising. "Sometimes we'll know that next Tuesday's show is underperforming in terms of sales, so we need to send out an email to entice people to come to that particular show," said Muscarella. IMA created a segment of NYCB's email subscribers who are located in the New York tri-state area. To promote shows within 7 days, emails were directed only to those within a drivable distance of the theatre. "We don't want to abuse our list by sending to individuals in California who most likely will not be able to make a performance within a week," mentioned Westfield.

In addition to geographical targets, IMA structured other email segments including: educators, international groups, group sales, and segments by performance attended. To promote ticket sales to these groups, IMA sent specific messaging per segment. "We'd promote a free children's dance lesson to the educators group or promote a special discount for group sales tickets," said Westfield.

To help grow NYCB's younger audience, their website underwent a complete redesign in January 2008. Concurrently, IMA updated NYCB's email template to reflect their new image. "This change dramatically improved NYCB's appeal to a much younger audience. The look was more DKNY than classy, more athletic than elegant," said Westfield. Not only was the updated look helpful in appealing to a younger audience; it was also more beneficial for email rendering. The design afforded easier rendering with limited but strong imagery in the header.

NYCB's appeal to a younger audience was also improved by the addition of behind the scenes YouTube videos featuring NYCB practices, one-on-one interviews with dancers, and sneak peaks for upcoming performances. "These videos helped NYCB connect with a younger audience familiar with YouTube. We knew however that all these videos would have to be 'pulled' by the consumer from YouTube, so in order to help 'push' the videos, we utilized email marketing to promote the videos," said Westfield. For NYCB fans and potential fans, the ability to view exclusive videos helps convey a vibrant and energetic image of the company. The videos help engage users in the full experience of the NYCB Company. By watching the practice and work involved before the show begins, it helps entice email recipients to watch the full performance.

Results:

Through a multi-faceted email marketing campaign, IMA has helped to not only increase ticket sales, but have also maintained the strong NYCB brand and expanded the target audience.

NYCB noted an increase in metrics of tracked activities attributable to the email marketing efforts. For a recent email marketing campaign promoting subscription enrollment, the subscription link received 94.3% of all clicks. On average, their subscription link will receive 72% of all click-throughs in the email. "NYCB will immediately see an increase in ticket sales after we send out a promotional email designed to elicit ticket sales," said Westfield.

With an improved design and more targeted campaigns, NYCB has seen their click-to-open rates have increased 66%, unsubscribes have declined and they've seen open rates upwards of 41%. YouTube videos also met with great success. A YouTube link in their email campaign receives double the number of click-throughs on average than other links.

"NYCB has been very pleased with the success of their email marketing program, and we have many plans to improve in the near future to help increase the success they've seen. We know that part of this success is due to working with Bronto and their client services team. Bronto not only helps us with technical support but more importantly tactical advice to help propel NYCB's email program to the next level," said Muscarella.

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