

FREE FOR ALL

**A COMPILATION OF
BEST PRACTICES FROM**

**FREE NIGHT OF THEATER
A NATIONAL PROGRAM OF
THEATRE COMMUNICATIONS GROUP**

BY CLAYTON LORD

**DIRECTOR OF MARKETING AND AUDIENCE DEVELOPMENT
THEATRE BAY AREA**

WITH PHILLIP MATTHEWS

**DIRECTOR OF AUDIENCE PROGRAMS
THEATRE COMMUNICATIONS GROUP**

Free Night of Theater is a program of
Theatre Communications Group

This guide was made possible by a generous grant from the
Doris Duke Charitable Foundation

This guide has been published as part of the
Theatre Bay Area DataPoint Program



This guide is available in digital form at www.tcg.org and at www.theatrebayarea.org/datapoint, where you can also gain free access to research and reports on a variety of other arts-related topics.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

3	ABOUT THIS GUIDE
6	PART 1: GOT MILK FOR THEATRE <ul style="list-style-type: none">- A BIT OF HISTORY- NEW VERSUS, WELL, “NEW”
12	PART 2: GIVING TO GET <ul style="list-style-type: none">- REACHING OUT TO THEATRES- INCREASING THEATRE BUY-IN
21	PART 3: BREAKING DOWN ATTENDANCE BARRIERS <ul style="list-style-type: none">- GETTING THE WORD OUT- ATTRACTING NEW AUDIENCES- PROMOTIONAL MATERIALS
33	PART 4: MAKING IT LAST <ul style="list-style-type: none">- TACKLING NO-SHOWS- AT THE THEATRE- AFTER THE SHOW
44	CONCLUSION: CHECKPOINT SAN FRANCISCO
47	THANKS AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

“Free Night of Theater began in three cities four years ago and has now grown into a giant collaboration between service organizations, theatres and their communities. One of the most important things we do for this program is give each city and its Free Night managing partners the flexibility to make the program work in a way that may be unique to their market. It is at the grassroots level that theatres need to engage and, as a national organization, we are proud to be able to give that opportunity to our participants.”

*—Teresa Eyring, Executive Director,
Theatre Communications Group*

This is a compilation of many of the best practices discovered during the four years that Theatre Communications Group’s national Free Night of Theater program has been in existence. It also provides a comprehensive list of solutions for the most common issues that organizers and individual companies have faced when undertaking Free Night events.

The concept behind Free Night of Theater is so simple that it can be easy to neglect how this national audience development program has proven to be groundbreaking and remarkably effective. Introduced as a three-city pilot program in 2005, Free Night’s goal has been to increase public awareness of our national theatre community, while at the same time attracting new and non-traditional audiences to resident theatres. Now presented in more than 120 cities by over 650 theatres, the program provides a unique opportunity for its participants. Theatres, service organizations, arts councils and even city governments are collaborating on a nationwide initiative that increases their visibility, provides new sponsorship opportunities and introduces new audiences in their individual communities to the joy of theatre, perhaps for the first time.

This guide was created, thanks to a generous grant from the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, and from surveys and interviews with other local managing partners across the country. It provides a sampling of proven best practices from various successful local Free Night program models. Theatre Communications Group and Theatre Bay Area have worked closely on the program since its inception. This guide is a selective collection of campaign profiles gathered by Phillip Matthews at TCG and Clayton Lord at Theatre Bay Area, and not meant to be a comprehensive survey of all the local variations of this very versatile program.

This guide offers the steps necessary to create a Free Night event. Part 1, “Got Milk for Theatre,” provides a brief overview of the genesis and goals of Free Night. In Part 2, “Giving to Get,” enters into the process, focusing first on engaging the community of theatres who provide free tickets and a willingness to engage in this program. Part 3, “Breaking Down Attendance Barriers,” focuses on designing and generating materials for the program and using them to get new, primed audiences to the theatre. Part 4, “Making It Last,” delves into making sure that those who reserve Free Night tickets actually get in the door, and highlights how to interact and follow up with these newcomers to ensure Free Nighters turn into regular attendees at the highest rate possible.

This guide was written by Clayton Lord, the director of marketing and audience development at Theatre Bay Area, one of the original regional organizers of Free Night of Theater, with input from Phillip Matthews, director of audience programs at Theatre Communications Group (TCG) and the national coordinator of Free Night of Theater. Experience from around the country confirms that a Free Night campaign demands commitment of staff time, energy and resources. This guide will show, however, that with dedication, Free Night of Theater can

blossom into a powerful and sustainable audience development initiative for theatres and potentially the entire performing arts sector.

PART I: GOT MILK FOR THEATRE

A BIT OF HISTORY

Following 9/11 and the downturn in arts participation that began immediately afterward, Ben Cameron, then-executive director of Theatre Communications Group (TCG), the national service organization for professional not-for-profit American theatre, began hearing calls for a simple campaign to raise awareness of theatre across the country. Companies were having trouble getting traction with new audiences because, by and large, they didn't have the resources to mount blanket "we're here!" campaigns to attract large swaths of the community who might be inclined to attend, but were often unaware of theatre offerings in their areas.

As Cameron puts it, "We needed somebody to do Got Milk for theatre."

The Got Milk campaign, which originated in California in 1993 and was eventually expanded nationally, has over the years featured many variations on the basic concept that whatever you're doing, wherever you are, milk will make whatever was happening better.

Imagining a national Got Milk campaign for theatre was enormously appealing, but the creators of Got Milk have spent more than \$90 million to blanket the country with their message. The national theatre community would have far fewer resources to mount a similar initiative. Cameron took this as a challenge and began gathering influential theatre professionals to brainstorm the topic. Introduced at the 2003 TCG National Conference in Milwaukee, the conversation centered on how the national theatre community might better work together—not one theatre at a time, but as an entire sector—to reach new audiences. The goal was to put aside entrenched rivalries and work together to

overcome perceived barriers of price and time that discourage many potential patrons from attending the theatre. In Milwaukee, theatre leaders were asked, “How can we think differently? What resources can we put on the table collectively? What would raise awareness?” And from this, the question came up, “What would happen if theatre were free?”

What would happen if, for one night, anyone anywhere in the country could walk into a theatre and see a show for free? It was a breathtakingly simple concept that its creators felt would stimulate attendance, boost theatre buy-in and garner media coverage.

In 2004, the first three pilot cities in the Free Night of Theater project were selected with an eye toward a fall 2005 launch. The service organizations in those cities, San Francisco, Austin and Philadelphia, planned for a year with TCG, looking at a number of variables: Should the campaign’s message be “theatre for free” or “theatre for the cost of a movie?” Some wondered if you give something away for free, have you necessarily devalued it? What would participating theatres receive in return for their donated tickets? How would campaign organizers find these “new audiences?”

Through the collaborative efforts of TCG, Theatre Bay Area, Austin Circle of Theaters and the Theatre Alliance of Greater Philadelphia, the first Free Night of Theater campaign launched in October 2005. In the course of a month, the pilot effort distributed over 10,000 tickets.

When Teresa Eyring arrived as TCG’s Executive Director in 2007, the program was serving 70 communities, 398 theatres and was distributing 30,000 tickets.

“I understood the value of the program, but also could see that ticket inventory would keep it from reaching the originally imagined goal of an overall net increase in American theatre-going

audiences,” says Eyring. “It was clear, though, that free tickets and new audience members were not the only reason to continue investing in Free Night. An important by-product of the program was a strengthened network of relationships and communication among a national group of collaborators.”

In addition to the group effort of planning the event, TCG and its collaborators were able to offer technical assistance and professional opportunities for theatres seeking to build retain new audiences.

Since its inaugural year in 2005, the program has steadily expanded each year, and in 2009 the Free Night of Theater campaign is expected to reach more than 120 communities across the country. Over 700 theatres will distribute some 75,000 free tickets. Participating companies have seen upwards of three-quarters of Free Night attendees return to the theatre in the year after getting their free tickets. One out of every three theatregoers say they go to the theatre more now than before the program, and 86% credit their more frequent theatre attendance to the fact that they participated in Free Night.

Since its first pilot year, Free Night has generated buzz, increased attendance and created a whole new crop of data on who makes up current and prospective theatre audiences. While Free Night continues to evolve, it remains at its core an essentially simple program: swinging open the doors of America’s theatres for free, offering newcomers a taste of what this country’s theatre community has to offer.

NEW VERSUS, WELL, “NEW”

While reading this guide, one might note a tension between two different takes on what is meant by “new audiences.” One, the more obvious, is “people who have never been to theatre

before.” The second, less obvious (but more common), is “people who have never been to your theatre before.”

At its start, the goals of Free Night centered on the second category, primarily because the initial organizers thought they’d have more success reaching out to sometime theatregoers and encouraging them to try something new. Accordingly, the first year’s marketing campaign featured actors in costumes (i.e., those who would be seen on stage) as opposed to audience members (i.e., those who would be doing the seeing) because focus groups suggested that images of actors conjured positive memories of previous theatre experiences and were more likely to draw infrequent theatregoers back to the theatre.

In the years since the pilot initiative, especially in veteran Free Night communities like San Francisco and Los Angeles (who came on in year 2), the focus of the campaign has broadened (in San Francisco) and shifted (in Los Angeles). Campaign organizers in these cities focused their efforts on non-theatregoers—people who are primed demographically and psychographically to attend theatre, but who aren’t currently going for whatever reason. The images of the Free Night campaigns in the Bay Area and LA shifted to feature audience members rather than actors, and the messaging shifted in a similar way, emphasizing the experience of the theatregoer.

Douglas Clayton, who runs the program for the LA Stage Alliance says, “We basically refrained from advertising through public channels. We went through corporations that had appealing employees who weren’t already theatregoers, did a similar thing with students and sent postcards to people on our Big List [community audience database] who were found on the lists of multiple arts organizations but not on any theatre’s.”

Clayton points out, though, “It’s a challenge to tell people who go to theatre that Free Night isn’t the event for you.”

Targeting people who never attend the theatre can make it challenging to get your tickets distributed only to these individuals. The campaign must morph into a kind of stealth effort, with messages flying under the radar of regular theatregoers. In LA, this meant eschewing major media for the campaign—no big stories and very little “advertising.” Instead, the LA campaign employed creative micro-targeted outreach to corporations and their employees, specially tailored efforts to reach minority communities, and finely focused attempts to attract persons who were active in the arts but not regular theatregoers (utilizing the Big List mailing mentioned previously).

Not surprisingly, individuals who never attend the theatre are generally harder to attract and convert into regular attendees than casual theatregoers who simply haven’t been to a specific venue before. Non-theatregoers are also more likely not to show up after reserving their tickets. That said, every one of these newcomers is an entirely new potential source of income for both the individual theatre company and the entire theatre community, and their value to the sector makes it worth the increased effort needed to secure their participation.

An alternative to targeting individuals who never attend theatre is to encourage casual theatregoers to try something new. In contrast to Los Angeles, Seattle aims at a different kind of “new” audience member. In the words of Theatre Puget Sound executive director Karen Zeller-Lane: “Instead of going after only non-theatregoers, we assume that our campaign is going to attract regular theatregoers whether we want it to or not. We try to encourage those who are already theatregoers to be initiators and advocates to newer patrons.”

This approach allows the campaign organizer to advertise broadly, utilizing as many media outlets as possible. Such a thrust

does run the risk of distributing free tickets to individuals who would otherwise have been willing to pay.

Both of types of new audiences are prime targets for initiatives like Free Night of Theater. Ultimately it's up to the local organizers to determine the goals of the campaign for their own community. Whichever definition of "new" an organizer chooses, this guide offers a variety of techniques for executing a Free Night campaign with the ultimate aim of building new audiences and increasing attendance. While Los Angeles and Seattle have finely focused their campaigns, many communities reach out in both directions and have found success in doing just that.

PART 2: GIVING TO GET

*“Free Night is essential for
continuing to build this community
and bring audiences together.”*

– Andrew McMasters, Wing-It Productions, Seattle

REACHING OUT TO THEATRES

Soliciting participation from local theatres is essential to the success of any Free Night program. Having a large number of participating theatres secures the credibility of the initiative, garners attention from the media and makes it possible to attract and retain a large number of new theatregoers.

Start Early

This bit of advice may seem obvious, but it isn't. For an October campaign, the organizer should start recruiting theatre participation by June. As with any solicitation, the process should be multi-tiered and include a good deal of follow up.

Following is a sample timeline from Theatre Bay Area:

June 1: Announcement email delivered to all member theatres. This email should include a detailed and upbeat description of the program, lay out the program's goals and describe the minimum requirements of each participating company (i.e., “we need you to give us tickets”). This early communication should also detail responsibilities of the organizer and include expected benefits for the participating company.

July 1: Hold a convening to introduce the program in person. Before the meeting, the organizer should have leading companies in place to bolster a sense of

community involvement. At the convening, the organizer should be prepared to answer detailed logistical questions that are sure to come up.

July 1 – September 1: Follow the initial solicitation and in-person convening with regular recruitment emails at least once or twice a month. These communications should include a list of all of the theatres that have agreed to participate, and should also announce some of the exciting results of the campaign nationwide. Some factoids (pulled from the 2008 Free Night of Theater Participant Survey report generated by Shugoll Research) might include:

- o 1 out of every 3 participants in Free Night of Theater attended 2 or fewer shows in the last year.
- o 33% of all participants are under the age of 35.
- o 26% of participants are non-white.
- o 2 out of every 3 participants had never been to the company they attended before. Of those two-thirds, 33% have been back to that theatre and purchased tickets since—and 2% bought a subscription.
- o Overall, 77% of participants have gone back to a theatre since the Free Night campaign.
- o 34% of people who attended Free Night now say they go to more theatre than before, and of those, 86% say that Free Night is the reason they attend more theatre now.

August 1: Participating theatres should be signed up, generally speaking, by September 1. The beginning of August is a good time to step up recruitment efforts. At Theatre Bay Area, companies that had participated in previous years but had yet to sign up for the current campaign were sent personalized emails in the first week

of August and were called in the second week. In the initial year, every single one of Theatre Bay Area's 400-plus companies received a phone call soliciting their participation. Ultimately, over a quarter of its theatres participated in the program.

The campaign organizer should be prepared to stay in close contact with companies until the completion of the campaign and even beyond. The organizer should make sure theatres are satisfied with the execution of the campaign, that they have received all the information they need, and that they are given the opportunity to participate further (e.g., give you more tickets). The end of one year's campaign is not too soon to announce the following year's Free Night program.

Make It Easy

Basic rules of any marketing campaign apply. Provide an easy way for theatres to sign up. TCG manages a national website (www.freenightoftheater.net) where companies can sign up and assign themselves to a region. In certain communities like the San Francisco Bay Area, independent websites are used to sign up theatres and disseminate tickets. Whether utilizing the national site or a regional alternative, it's crucial that participating theatres find it easy to sign up online, allocate tickets, input information and receive will-call lists.

Enabling theatres to donate additional tickets becomes especially important once the campaign launches, because if the allotted tickets go quickly (as they often do), companies are often willing to provide more—but only if it's easy to do.

Be High-Touch

In the words of the Utah Arts Council, "Don't leave theatres in the dark." The organizing partner must communicate regularly,

send updates often, and inform participating theatres on the campaign's publicity efforts and media coverage.

It's also important that the Free Night organizer name one staff member to be the campaign coordinator, someone who will be accessible and thoroughly knowledgeable about the program. Participating theatres will inevitably have lots of questions (lots!). Being able to answer questions and address concerns quickly and consistently is crucial to keeping the program running smoothly.

The coordinator should be in regular communication with participating companies even if the campaign has been executed for a number of years. Theatres often see changes in management, so repeating, year after year, the basics of the program is essential. Atlanta is considering bi-weekly conference calls with participants. In San Francisco, weekly email updates on the campaign are delivered during the six weeks prior to the campaign's launch and carry on during the entire month of ticket giveaways. The updates include status reports, information on how to access will-call lists, the latest on which theatres are participating and more.

In Dallas, being high touch meant personally going into the theatre community to solicit involvement. Campaign organizers hosted two informational sessions where they explained the whole program in detail, and then provided a private webpage where participating companies could access "an archive of email updates, logos, banner ads, program book ads, templates, research findings, etc."

Leverage Participation for More Participation

Especially in the first year, theatre leaders can often be skeptical of the program. To build confidence, encourage theatres that are enthusiastic about the campaign to be advocates for the program. In Dallas, the Office of Cultural Affairs approached

most of the major theatres before officially announcing the city's participation in Free Night. In their words, "Having the up-front buy-in of the major theatre institutions made the process of soliciting other theatres relatively smooth."

Set Expectations

It's important to set appropriate expectations by clearly laying out the campaign's goals. If the focus is non-theatre-goers, for example, companies should understand that the Free Nighters coming in their doors will be unfamiliar with theatre and generally may not really know what to do. These newcomers will need some "hand holding." Theatres should also expect a certain no-show rate. The campaign organizer should inform theatres that due to limited ticket inventory (tickets in all markets go extremely fast!) the publicity often becomes a "stealth campaign" - with very targeted outreach rather than a general broad-base media campaign - and will not be broadly visible.

If, on the other hand, the goal is getting casual theatre-goers to visit a company they haven't been to before, then the organizer should set different expectations. Theatres should be aware that while the organizer is taking every effort to direct audiences to an unfamiliar company, experience has shown that some of the Free Nighters will be patrons they already know.

INCREASING THEATRE BUY-IN

It's important that participating theatres understand the program's many benefits, such as increased visibility for theatre in a region, new patrons inside the theatre and in the database, exposure for each of the participating theatres, new cohesion in the local theatre community. It's equally important that the organizer address any concerns, some of which are likely to

center around the tension of promoting free tickets and paid events, sometimes in the same materials.

Provide Exposure

Put 'Em on the Postcard or Poster

Almost everything the organizer does to market the campaign can be used to increase exposure for the participating companies. The organizer should list participating companies on postcards and other campaign material. The Free Night website, with its comprehensive list of participating companies and featured performances, serves as a powerful medium for building awareness among tens of thousands of potential audience members.

The campaign serves to build awareness more generally of theatre in a region. The organizer may choose to build awareness particularly among the most uninitiated. For example, the LA Stage Alliance runs a joint mailing list co-op program called the Big List. As part of its Free Night program, the Big List is used to target mailings to thousands of people who are demographically suited for theatre attendance, but haven't attended a theatre in the last two or three years. It would be unlikely for any one theatre to target these people because of the potentially low return on investment. But given the goals Los Angeles has chosen for its Free Night program, this strategy fits perfectly into the campaign's marketing plan. Building awareness among non-theatre-goers is a benefit to the entire theatre community. Incidentally, the Los Angeles effort and a similar postcard mailing in San Francisco each yielded encouraging results—approximately 1% of LA participants cited the postcard as their prime motivator for participating. In San Francisco, the strategy focused on communities of color and yielded multi-percent increases in Asian and Hispanic audiences.

Put 'Em in Front of the Public

In Seattle, the campaign organizer, Theatre Puget Sound, hosts an in-person launch event the day before the online ticket release. Individuals who attend have first crack at the available tickets. In order to increase the exposure of its member theatres, Theatre Puget Sound partners with the local convention center to present a theatre expo where all companies are offered display tables at low cost (including those not participating in Free Night) where they display information on their seasons and missions, and where theatre representatives can chat one-on-one with event attendees.

A game is used as an incentive for attendees to find out more about the participating theatres. Anyone wishing to take advantage of the early Free Night ticket giveaway must answer trivia questions on the local theatres, encouraging the attendees to talk to the companies represented.

“Playing the trivia game influenced what they attended,” says one theatre company representative in Seattle. “In previous years, it felt like people came to the launch event with what they wanted to see already in mind, but now they have new options.”

In Seattle, some of the theatres cite the launch event and associated public awareness effort as their primary reason for participating in Free Night.

Put 'Em on the Web (Early)

The longer the list of participating companies is available in advance of the ticket release date, the more publicity it generates for the companies. In San Francisco, web traffic (per Google Analytics) starts ramping up as early as the second half of August, a full six weeks before the ticket release date (and at least two weeks before the main advertising campaign begins). Theatre Bay Area aims to get the list of participating theatres and shows on

the website as early as possible. Additional companies and performances are added as more theatres join in. Launching the website early has proven to encourage participation from local theatres. Seeing impressive list of participating companies persuades hesitant theatres to sign on themselves. Web pages listing participating theatres and featured shows should be posted at least a month out from the ticket giveaway date, should be easy to find and should include good information about the companies and shows.

Make Free Night Part of a Larger Event

Another way to increase theatre participation, especially from those whose leaders are skeptical about the effectiveness of distributing free tickets as a means to build audiences, is to connect Free Night to a larger audience development effort.

In Seattle, for example, Theatre Puget Sound has been running Live Theatre Week for several years with good results. Live Theatre Week includes the Free Night launch event and subsequent giveaway, along with the Target Family Theatre Day event, special receptions for Free Night enthusiasts and other events not directly related to the word “free.” As part of Live Theatre Week, companies are encouraged to offer host events other than regularly scheduled performances: open rehearsals, backstage tours, special public performances and the like. One theatre, following its Free Night performance, offered an open gala subsidized by a small grant from Theatre Puget Sound and saw twice as many attendees as expected, including many who did not come to the show!

Austin, like Seattle, has created a series of audience development and awareness-building events of which Free Night is a part. The Austin festival, which is pan-arts and includes free, discounted and regularly priced events, centers around the

message to “get your art on” and has become increasingly popular. In fact, the Austin “Get Your Art On” initiative has grown into a year-round awareness-building campaign.

PART 3: BREAKING DOWN ATTENDANCE BARRIERS

“TCG’s Free Night of Theater provides the opportunity for a broader audience to be introduced to the excitement of live theatre. It has been a foot-in-the-door for many new audience members, and that’s something that benefits us all!”

– Molly Smith, Artistic Director, Arena Stage, Washington, DC

GETTING THE WORD OUT

Recruiting participation from theatres and obtaining a large inventory of tickets to give away is only the first step in the Free Night campaign. The success of the whole effort lies in making sure new patrons reserve the Free Night tickets once they are released. It is not a given that people will just happen upon the campaign website and snap up the tickets—the organizer must energetically advertise the program.

Step one, of course, is to identify financial resources for advertising the campaign. Some regions have had success in the first years of the campaign from their local foundation community, but experience has shown that securing longer-term support from foundations is hard.

Sponsorships!

Free Night can be an appealing program for corporations and media groups, so one main way to secure publicity is to work out sponsorships with local businesses. Local organizers have found successful ways for sponsorships to work.

The first and more common is in-kind sponsorship. Free Night often attracts media partnerships. In San Francisco, for

example, a weekly newspaper, a daily newspaper, a monthly magazine, a radio station, a television station and assorted web zines and events sites have participated as in-kind sponsors. Theatre Bay Area was greatly helped by hiring a publicist, Artemia Communications, who specializes in both traditional media relations and securing corporate and media sponsorships. While hiring a publicist takes money, Theatre Bay Area estimates a return in in-kind sponsorship dollars to the tune of 15-to-1.

Seattle, in 2008, hired a publicist for the first time to great success, and plans to continue in the future.

Since cash resources available for Free Night can often be limited, some local organizers have had success in leveraging in-kind or low cost PR representation to accomplish what San Francisco and Seattle have been able to do. Organizers can also enlist the help of local theatres, boards of directors and personal contacts to enlist pro bono or discounted assistance from PR professionals.

Cash support for Free Night is more difficult to secure. Certain foundations and public agencies do support the Free Night program, but many local organizers have found their best bet is to establish partnerships with corporations. Los Angeles has an interesting strategy in pursuing dual objectives of corporate money and attracting new theatregoers. For two of its corporate sponsors, LA Stage Alliance secured additional financial support in exchange for early access for the sponsors' employees to LA's Free Night tickets. The corporate sponsors and the LA theatres were equally pleased with this arrangement. The sponsors' employees took advantage of the tickets, with many returning to purchase tickets later and even subscribe and donate. These corporate employees have dispensable incomes and are appealingly youthful for many theatre groups. LA's corporate

sponsorship model has proven to be encouragingly successful for the organizer, the theatres and the sponsors alike.

Getting Press

As mentioned earlier, Theatre Bay Area has found it invaluable to have a publicist handle both press and sponsorships. While Free Night has a high potential to draw press attention, it's essential to have someone experienced in media outreach to garner it.

Theatre Puget Sound hired a PR consultant in 2008, and according to executive director Karen Zeller-Lane, "We got a lot more varied press in magazines, neighborhood newspapers and radio." To help the local partners, TCG provides templates of PR outreach materials that have proven to be very helpful, especially for organizations that have limited staff and resources.

Launching the Campaign

Local organizers have found it very beneficial to launch the campaign with a public event. Since Free Night performances in most localities stretch over a period of several days or even an entire month, a launch event provides a focal point for all of the press coverage.

In San Francisco, Theatre Bay Area has built its launch event around its half-price TIX Booth in Union Square. Free Night patrons line up at the booth hours before the live ticket giveaway and are entertained while they wait by performers from the participating theatre companies. Television media tape the event and run news stories that night, which coincides nicely with the online ticket launch. New York, which participated in Free Night for the first time in 2008, held a large event in Union Square that included performances by participating theatre companies, special guests and a proclamation from the mayor. Plans for New York's

2009 launch include a rally of theatre professionals, outdoor display tables for participating theatres and special youth programming. The New York organizers are considering creating a theatre parade in coming years.

Use Multiple Media Platforms

Free Night organizers have found best success in using as many media avenues as possible to get out the word. For example:

Newspapers – In-kind sponsorships can be successful here, as newspapers and other print media are often interested in supporting a program with free or reduced-rate advertising. Neighborhood and alternative newspapers are particularly open to this approach.

Television – Television can be a long shot, but San Francisco has had success each year in receiving media sponsorship from the local NBC affiliate. Work well in advance to interest TV producers, and stay flexible. As TV crews may need to respond to breaking news stories and unexpectedly change your timeline.

Radio – Organizers have found the secret with radio is to have a good hook. Austin lined up a series of stories featuring non-arts professionals talking about how the arts have impacted their lives.

Consider outdoor advertising as well. Some organizers have seen success in placing advertising in subway stations, bus kiosks and on municipal buses. Organizers have been successful in partnering with municipal agencies to get free or low-cost placement. San Francisco, for example, partnered with BART commuter rail system. BART allows Theatre Bay Area to hang large banners in 10 stations for free, and has also promoted Free

Night through its own email blasts and on platform digital screen announcements.

Use Your Big List

If the community has a performing arts Big List (a shared database combining audience lists from multiple organizations), the organizer may find success in utilizing it. In San Francisco and Los Angeles, mailings targeting specific audience members found through the Big List have yielded encouraging response rates and have helped (in San Francisco) increase minority representation.

With or without a Big List, the organizer should develop campaign materials for participating theatres to display in their lobbies, stuff in their programs and distribute to their own mailing lists. It should be noted that such efforts by the theatres will necessarily reach theatregoers. To be effective messaging should emphasize trying a *new* theatre rather than the one distributing the material.

Oregon Shakespeare Festival (OSF) provides another interesting alternative to using mailing lists. It has seen success approaching its internal list of individuals that have requested more information about its theatre. OSF is recognized as a destination point in the Northwest, and as such it has a large list of potential patrons that have never visited it before. While OSF is unique in certain ways, this approach may well prove successful for other theatres and communities as well.

ATTRACTING NEW AUDIENCES

Attracting new audiences is the first and foremost goal of the Free Night program. But, as mentioned earlier, “new” can mean two different things, and step one in creating a marketing campaign is to choose which type of “new” audience the local campaign is trying to attract. Once the goal is set, pursue the

techniques outlined in this guide to extend your reach and build a bigger audience base.

Be High Touch (a.k.a. Stay in Touch)

Being “high touch” has proven essential to the entire Free Night process. The organizer must work closely with the theatres. It’s crucial to keep contractors and sponsors informed and excited about the program—not to mention the organizer’s own board and staff! And of course, both the organizer and the theatre companies must maintain contact with the patrons who come through their doors.

For some organizers, being high touch hasn’t been easy. The staffs of the organizer and the participating theatres alike are often overworked and out of time. But the extra time taken to give personal attention to patrons can achieve real results. Here’s a story about how a staff member from Atlanta helped a woman reserve tickets to a Free Night show:

“This woman mentioned that she had never considered herself a theatre person – it was always too expensive. Our staff member introduced her not only to free theatre for one night, but she also explored with the new theatre patron other options for accessing live performances on a budget. The woman exclaimed that she never knew theatre was for her.”

Use Non-Traditional Lists

Beyond a Big List and utilizing mailing lists from participating theatres, consider reaching out to your Chamber of Commerce, ethnic associations, religious groups, single moms groups, family facilities, charity organizations like Coats for Kids and child-focus

organizations like the Boy and Girl Scouts. As mentioned earlier, Los Angeles has found success in targeting employees of sponsor corporations. Theatre Bay Area partners with the San Francisco Convention and Visitors Bureau to reach the city's large tourist and visitor community as it leverages its relationships with other arts services organizations in San Jose and Sacramento. Theatre Bay Area also makes sure to get the word out to the other downtown businesses, highlighting the benefits of Free Night to their employees and customers.

Reaching Diverse Communities

Over its first four years, Free Night has been impressively successful in attracting new audiences of color (the national average in 2008 was 28%). While free tickets are just as enticing to minority audiences as they are to white patrons, relevant programming is perhaps even more important in attracting and retaining persons of color. As Karen Zeller-Lane of Theatre Puget Sound, says: "It's hard to get communities of color in the doors if they look at the list of shows and they don't see anything that reflects their lives."

San Francisco has had some success raising the minority quotient by creating targeted marketing materials that appeal to non-white audiences. In 2008, Theatre Bay Area created four postcards with essentially the same messaging. Each of those postcards had a different minority representative on it, and through the Bay Area Big List, it was able to send approximately 20,000 postcards split out by minority group. There was a bump in the number of Hispanics and Asians participating in Free Night in 2008, although the numbers were still quite small.

In 2008, in New York, TCG implemented a successful poster campaign in thirteen neighborhoods in five boroughs where nontraditional audiences lived, and where there were theatres

TCG particularly wanted to promote. This increased the diversity and community involvement of audiences dramatically, and the NYC program reported that 55% of its audience identified as non-white. The same technique worked well in Chicago in 2008.

Seattle created a Spanish-language version of its postcard in 2008 and distributed it in regions of the city where high concentrations of Spanish speakers lived. This was part of a larger sustained campaign by Theatre Puget Sound to reach out to minority and underserved communities in Seattle. This work is seen by TPS as both a public service and an effort that can have substantial long-term audience development effects, especially in areas that are experiencing changing demographics.

Theatre Bay Area analyzed its 2008 Free Night numbers and concluded that there is a consistent discrepancy in white vs. non-white attendance based on the perceived diversity of the company and/or production. While this information is not surprising, it does lead toward a larger question of whether outreach to diverse audiences can really succeed without an actual increase in shows reflecting the lives of people of color.

Multiple Media Pathways

As mentioned earlier, marketing efforts should reach out in as many directions as possible, especially when working to diversify attendance. Recent surveying by Shugoll Research suggests that a large proportion (about 1 out of 3) of participants heard about Free Night via new media, like email and Facebook. These methods are cheap and can reach more people more easily over time.

That said, 2 out of 3 participants learned of Free Night through more traditional venues—press stories, mass advertising (like bus banners or kiosk posters) or more mainstream print/radio/TV marketing. It's important to balance old and new

media. By looking at Google Analytics on its ticketing site, Theatre Bay Area was able to discern that its strongest response came from a day-long radio giveaway. In another year, it was a television spot that drove traffic to the Free Night site.

Almost every region uses a combination of old and new media for outreach. For example, the Atlanta Coalition of Performing Arts combined new media outreach like Facebook, websites and email groups (new mom's groups, student groups, etc.) with postcards and more traditional outreach.

Cross-Theatre Partnerships

Some communities, including San Francisco, have considered having companies “swap” audiences, or specifically promote another sister company as part of Free Night. For example, two disparate companies that are close together geographically could encourage their paying audiences one night to visit the other theatre on Free Night. Companies could even share tickets in advance and distribute them right from the stage. The potential advantage of this method is increased attendance, guaranteed prior theatregoers and a sense of goodwill in the community. Such efforts in San Francisco have been back-burnered for now because of staffing issues – it would be quite the undertaking to oversee such a swap system.

Rolling Giveaways

In the Bay Area and Chicago, the organizers have experimented with rolling ticket giveaways. Most Free Night organizers release allotted tickets all at once. Tickets are often distributed very quickly, and as years go on, more and more of them are reserved by past Free Nighters who become savvy at snapping up available tickets. To level the playing field between veteran Free Nighters and those trying to participate for the first

time, Theatre Bay Area in 2008 encouraged theatres to give the same amount of tickets as in previous years, but spread the allotment out over multiple performances in multiple weeks. By doing so, Theatre Bay Area was able to offer a wider variety of shows over the entire month of October. Theatre Bay Area utilized 4 weekly giveaways to release the entire inventory instead of giving away all the tickets at once. Free Night patrons could review the list of all of the performances for the entire month, but only certain performances would be released for reservations, or “go live” in any given week. A similar system was instituted in Chicago.

The goals of the rolling release date were two-fold: to increase the number of first-time Free Night participants and to decrease no-shows (assuming that the fewer days between reserving a ticket and the performance date, the lower the no-show rate). Theatre Bay Area—during its fourth Free Night campaign—did see an increase in percentage of first-time Free Night participants. For no-shows, San Francisco did see a small dip, but Chicago—where Free Night was in its first year—saw a remarkably high rate of no-shows.

Limit Repeat Customers (Or Harness Them)

As mentioned above, San Francisco revised the entire ticketing strategy in order to reach first-timers over repeat Free Night patrons. After several annual Free Night campaigns, many communities have seen an increasingly large percentage of tickets going to individuals who have participated in previous years.

To make sure tickets are distributed beyond these repeat customers, the organizers in Seattle and San Francisco set up a kind of “gateway” feature in the ticketing component. As customers picked their show, they were asked, “Have you been to this company before?” If they answered “yes,” they were sent

back to the beginning of the process and informed politely that Free Night was meant to encourage patrons to try something new, so please choose a company you haven't been to before. Later in the reservation process, after being informed that their tickets were secure, the Free Night patrons were asked again if they had been to this theatre before (no penalty at this point if the answer was yes). By asking twice, the organizers could establish how many people were actually persuaded by the gatekeeper question to try something new, and how many patrons realized they could reserve tickets from a theatre they already knew if they simply lied and clicked "no." While not an absolute barrier, the gatekeeper question does work to direct Free Night patrons to theatres that are new to them.

Another novel way to approach repeat Free Night patrons is to recruit them as advocates for theatre and for the program. In Seattle, Theatre Puget Sound hosted a "Free Night Enthusiast" special event in 2008. This evening was designed specifically for "repeat offenders" and included a special reception, tickets to a show and a speech from the TPS executive director encouraging those people to become advocates and thanking them for their support of live theatre and the program.

Other cities, such as Los Angeles, employ a staff person to review the reservation lists, looking for multi-year patrons and individuals who have reserved tickets under multiple email addresses (almost all Free Night organizers limit the number of free tickets to 2 per patron). Those who have reserved more than their share are emailed. Theatre Bay Area too sends emails to people who reserve tickets to more than one show, reminding the patron they are limited to 2 tickets to one performance and asking them to choose one show or the other by a certain date or all their tickets will be released back to the system. These emails are highly successful in limiting each patron to 2 tickets and

allowing the highest number of individuals possible access to the Free Night campaign.

PROMOTIONAL MATERIALS

Make It Clear

Campaign materials to both patrons and theatre companies should be clear, consistent and up front. As the Utah organizers note, “Our theatres are very busy as it is and we want to make their participation as simple and seamless as possible.”

Deepening the Message

As the years go on, it’s possible to increase the complexity of your message and use Free Night as a springboard for other messaging. Theatre Bay Area used Free Night 2007 as a platform to speak to the deep social and psychological benefits of participating in live theatre. The images in the marketing materials shifted away from actors and stage-centered imagery to images that focused on the theatregoer. People featured in the images reflected the demographic diversity of the Bay Area. While the 2007 messages in the Bay Area were deeper than the previous years’, which had emphasized “free!” over all else, feedback on the campaign showed that many found the messaging over-complicated. In 2008 Theatre Bay Area simplified the message and the images, placing “free” front and center while still using the campaign to emphasize the deep value of theatre (in a lighthearted way) and as an opportunity to promote Theatre Bay Area’s year-round discounted ticket programs.

PART 4: MAKING IT LAST

TACKLING NO-SHOWS

No-shows are the most common and most complained about problem for the Free Night campaign nationwide. No-shows were not an unexpected challenge. As with anything free, there will be a portion of people who will forget, or come up with something better to do, or simply decide at the last minute that they don't want to go. This does not make the problem any less frustrating for participating theatres.

There doesn't seem to be any reliable way to determine what events are going to get high no-show rates. Every time LA Stage Alliance, for example, thinks it has identified a pattern (often relating to weather and/or distance from the venue), some unforeseen circumstance will break the pattern. In 2008, a LORT theatre in the Bay Area offered a well-reviewed show, and it not only saw difficulties in giving away tickets through Free Night, but also had a higher-than-average Free Night no-show rate. Despite the vagueries, organizers have found ways to mitigate the problem of no-shows.

Douglas Clayton from LA Stage Alliance has some wise words for Free Night organizers: "The best practices that seem to be most useful to our members regarding no-show rates are the ones where they're taking advantage of the opportunity to pursue those people, whether they come or not." In other words, it's important to provide companies with contact information for all people reserving tickets to their performances, enabling theatres to pursue these patrons whether they made it to the performance or not.

Special Reminders

Organizers and participating theatres are encouraged to send reminder emails to all those who have reserved Free Night tickets. Some theatres have augmented standard reminders with more information about the show—plot synopsis, actor biographies, press features, reviews and links to podcasts and YouTube streams. Seattle Repertory says, “We send them a reminder email telling them how excited we are that they’re coming with links to our online magazine.”

In addition to a confirmation email sent immediately after the tickets are reserved (often delivered by the organizer), theatres often fare well sending a reminder email 2 days before the performance, and another the day of the show. It also helps to request that patrons notify the theatre if they cannot attend.

Picking Up the Phone

Some companies go so far as to call or mail a piece to the Free Nighters. Whether the Free Nighter shows up or not, theatres should be encouraged to leverage the patron’s interest and market to them in follow-up correspondence. In North Carolina, where the organizer has run much of the campaign with limited staffing and resources for outreach, (deleted “it”) strongly encourages this very high-touch approach. Angie Hayes, executive director of North Carolina Theatre Conference, says: “We encourage our companies to push personal connections. We suggest they make a follow-up phone call after the person makes a reservation, and also that they set up a staffed greeting table.” This approach, which is low-cost but high-impact, works well for companies seeking to keep their no-show rates down and their retention rates high.

Shortening the Lead Time

As mentioned earlier, some organizers have experimented with shortening the period between the date when the patron reserves the tickets and when she attends the Free Night show. In Los Angeles, such efforts have had little effect. Chicago, with its rolling giveaways, still saw high no-show rates. San Francisco, however, did see no-shows dropping modestly by shortening the time between the reservation date and the performance day.

Terence McFarland, executive director of LA Stage Alliance, points out that even if a theatre sees a 50% no-show rate, the people who show up are new audiences and vital prospects. Theatres should be encouraged to look past the problem of no-shows and focus their energy on continuing to pursue as energetically as possible all those who reserved tickets (expressing interest in the theatre and its offerings), retaining as repeat patrons those who did attend, and following up with the no-shows for future performances.

Overbooking

The League of Chicago Theatres encourages companies to overbook in an effort to counteract no-shows. The technique worked to pad those houses, but some other regions have been worried about accidentally having too many people show up and not being able to accommodate them. One theatre in Connecticut also reported overbooking, and said that it worked to lower the no-show rate.

An alternative to overbooking is to provide a waitlist or standby list. This can be problematic if people from the waitlist choose not to show up as well, but can mitigate some of the issues of no-shows. If cancellations arise, those on the standby list can be contacted before the show to fill the vacancy.

Welcoming Novice Theatregoers

As mentioned before, many Free Nighters are quite unfamiliar with the rituals of theatregoing and need a certain amount of special treatment to encourage them to return as repeat customers. As Andrew McMasters of Wing-It Productions in Seattle notes, “The people that we get for Free Night have never seen or heard of our company before.” Campaign organizers should encourage their theatres to keep this in mind.

The night of its Free Night performance, Seattle Rep offers a pre-show lobby talk, places special Free Night inserts in the programs, includes a welcome sign in the lobby and provides the Free Nighters with a follow-up offer afterward to get another ticket for \$20. Some companies are uncomfortable with trumpeting so loudly that a good portion of the audience is seeing the show for free when others have paid full-price. Regardless, campaign organizers have found a variety of ways to welcome Free Nighters through the theatre doors.

Pre-Show Email

The pre-show reminder email can be vital to lowering no-show rates. Often, the local organizer or TCG sends out a reservation confirmation immediately after the patron secures the tickets. After that, reminders become the responsibility of the individual company, and in some communities, the organizer.

Participating theatres should make the emails both informative and enticing—and most importantly, personal and warm. Many of the Free Nighters are not used to attending theatre and respond positively to feeling welcomed and appreciated.

The pre-show reminder email should include details that may seem obvious: the address of the theatre, directions, how to access public transportation, what time the show starts, what time patrons can pick up the tickets, how long the show will be,

whether there's an intermission, whether there's parking and how much it costs.

AT THE THEATRE

Program Insert

This is an optional and underused method for welcoming Free Nighters and exposing other theatregoers to the program. Every year, TCG prepares a program insert for companies, outlining the Free Night campaign and providing information on nonprofit theatres as a cultural resource. Other suggested options include curtain speeches and lobby materials.

In Dallas, Theatre Three decided to offer its entire house for free on one evening. On Theatre Three's Free Night, all the audience members were Free Nighters and the company felt comfortable to speak freely about the program utilizing a curtain speech, flyers and inserts.

Curtain Speech

Curtain speeches are a controversial method for welcoming Free Nighters. It's important for companies to assess how such a speech may affect their core audience. Certain companies refuse to do a curtain speech welcoming Free Night participants because they feel that it makes the non-Free Nighters feel cheated for having to pay for their tickets. These companies don't like the idea of advertising at the performance that they have given away large numbers of tickets for free.

Other theatres that do employ curtain speeches may simply say, "We have a special group that we'd like to recognize tonight. They're new to our organization, and we can't wait to show you what we can do!" In other cases, a company representative consciously singles out the Free Nighters. He asks them to stand up, and then talks about the Free Night program, how it's a

program to broaden audiences and invite newcomers in, and asks the rest of the audience to give a welcoming round of applause. And they do! In the end, each theatre must weigh how its audience will respond to such an announcement and utilize whatever method of welcoming Free Nighters that will work best for them.

Despite the controversy, the curtain speech has been the single most effective tool in getting patrons to return and buy tickets.

Lobby Signage

Utilizing signs in the lobby to welcome Free Nighters and promote the program has a similarly varied response from theatres as the curtain speech. Some companies love it because they feel like it shows their involvement in the community; other companies refuse to display lobby signs on Free Night for the same reasons they won't do a curtain speech. Theatres should assess their own audiences before utilizing lobby signage for Free Night.

Welcome Packets

One method of outreach that focuses specifically on Free Nighters (and is fairly invisible to other audience members) and that has been proven to have a big effect on them is to provide them with welcome/information packets at the box office. These packets can be comprehensive or simple. One example from Los Angeles featured hand-lettered calligraphy on the envelope and included special materials to acquaint the Free Nighter with the company.

Seattle Shakespeare Company starts its Free Night outreach early—communicating with the Free Night patrons as well as with its core audience. The company creates a one-sheet “Jump Start

Brief” and a podcast that allows novice theatregoers to learn beforehand more about what they’ll see. (In a study conducted by WolfBrown comparing Free Night participants to paying theatregoers, Free Nighters were more likely to seek out information on the show and company beforehand.) Theatres can benefit by employing these strategies.

Certain companies in Los Angeles also distribute packets at the door to Free Nighters. These packets include special offers, brochures and a welcome letter.

Have a Greeter

Certain companies have a special table set up in their lobby (in the same vein as a press table). In their communications to the Free Nighters prior to the event, these theatres advise Free Nighters to “skip the line” at the box office and head directly to this special table, which is welcoming but doesn’t necessary trumpet “free ticket recipients” to the paying audience members.

In Dallas, having a greeter was a popular technique. As one theatre put it, “We often do this at regular performances, but since there was an influx of ‘first timers’ on Free Night this was even more important. Someone with a smiling face to welcome them and guide them in the right direction made it run very smoothly.”

Special Reception

If you can swing it, it’s always nice to host a small reception for the Free Night attendees—or the entire audience—in their honor. The reception makes the Free Nighters feel valued and welcome and allows staff the opportunity to personally encourage the newcomers to return later.

Be Prepared to Teach

It's important to reiterate that many Free Nighters will be novice theatregoers. One theatre in Florida reported that many of the patrons who came to their Free Night had "very poor theatre etiquette." This can include arriving late, taking phone calls during the performance, disregarding the actors, etc. Unfamiliarity with the ritual of theatregoing is not unusual for Free Nighters. Organizers recommend companies to take up this challenge—send out an email beforehand acquainting Free Nighters with how to dress, when to show up, what to expect.

Following Up & Converting

Following up with Free Nighters to encourage retention is crucial if a theatre is to leverage Free Night as an audience development program. By taking time to do some personal and focused follow up with Free Nighters, theatres can dramatically increase the return and conversion rate of Free Nighters to repeat, paying customers.

Get Their Contact Information

Very important! If Free Nighters don't provide their contact information, they're lost to the organizer and the host theatre. Most contact information should be collected from the ticket reservation form. Once the Free Nighter has arrived at the show, companies can use surveys and other tools to suss out the newcomer's interests and theatregoing background.

Getting information can be as simple as passing out a survey, possibly attached to an offer or raffle. "We always ask people how they heard of us when they get their tickets," says Katy Jackson of Seattle Rep, "and with Free Night people, when we ask, for the most part they're entirely new people. Many are from out of town."

Surveying is also important in communities that haven't surveyed before. In Charleston, for example, one theatre noted "Free Night has allowed us to set measurable goals to track the efficacy of our marketing efforts."

AFTER THE SHOW

Follow-Up Emails

Both the organizer and the participating theatres should focus energy on following up with the Free Night patrons. Enticing repeat attendance with special offers, up to and including another round of free tickets, has been successful in spurring Free Nighters to come back for more.

Follow-up emails should recognize the new patron as a Free Night participant. Theatres who acknowledge Free Nighters specifically see far better results than those who just dump them into their database for standard outreach. Theatres should be reminded that the Free Nighter's connection to the company is rather tenuous and should be nurtured with some care to be sustained and grown.

2-for-1 Offers

One effective method used by some companies to increase return rates of Free Night patrons is to extend a special offer, such as a 2-for-1, for the company's next production. The 2-for-1 offer, paired with an enticing email promoting the next show, has been proven to entice Free Nighters back to the theatre. Easing Free Nighters up the payment scale can help people who previously thought they couldn't afford theatre realize that in fact they can.

Second Round of Free

A second round of free tickets (possibly with the support of a corporate sponsor or foundation) can be useful for deepening the patron's relationship with the company. While there must be some limit in terms of spending money to get Free Nighters to return, theatres might consider how much effort goes into cultivating all new patrons, and measure a set number of free tickets to other efforts to build and retain new audiences.

Quarterly Newsletter

In New York, the organizers set up a quarterly newsletter following the debut of Free Night in 2008. Theatres can access the entire list of Free Night participants in exchange for providing a free or discounted ticket offer in the newsletter. About 40 theatres took advantage, to good effect.

Use the Free Night Survey Results

Campaign organizers and individual companies alike should make a point of using the data from the Free Night survey results. This can be done in a variety of ways. For example, it's often helpful for the organizer to create a final report of the project—the numbers can be impressive, especially if follow-up surveying with the Free Night patrons is conducted in the year after the Free Night campaign. San Francisco's numbers show between 60% and 80% returning to the theatre as a paying customer in the six months after Free Night, depending on the year. Don't be afraid to wave this around far and wide with high-end donors, patrons, foundations and corporations.

Another option: Analyze the results and compare them to the local campaign goals: Are you getting less diversity than you'd like? Make that a goal for next year. Are no-show rates higher than you'd like? Work on increasing outreach and reminders.

From year to year, campaign organizers should aim to keep the program fresh and oriented toward new goals within the larger effort of audience development.

CONCLUSION: CHECKPOINT SAN FRANCISCO

“The demand for live theatre—when it’s made accessible to all—is overwhelming. We’re bringing in new audiences—young people, people of color, people from all walks of life—and the research tells us they are going back for more. Free Night of Theater has thrown the doors of our theatres open wide.”

– Brad Erickson, Executive Director, Theatre Bay Area

In its first four years, Free Night of Theater has proven to be an extraordinary success as both a national cooperation-building exercise and as a groundbreaking campaign for building new audiences. For Theatre Bay Area, this program has increased ownership of and participation in the health of the theatre community as a whole—an attitude which has led directly to the creation of the Bay Area Big List, an expanded Annual Conference, and an ongoing series of convenings that draw the entire arts community together and expand learning between organizations.

Those achievements are complemented by a greater awareness of the Bay Area’s theatre community, both by individual patrons and by the government and corporate entities that have become our partners in Free Night.

The enthusiasm and collaborative vibe that surrounds Free Night each year unites theatres of every size and shape. The program draws together theatre managers with years of experience and greenhorns who have yet to do a full marketing campaign. It connects theatre companies that are over a hundred miles apart (just within our own service area). And it links new

theatre-goers to a large community of over 100 participating theatres.

The power of Free Night, as with most effective marketing programs, has been in the simplicity of its message and goal. At its core, the program has always been about driving audience participation by offering newcomers a free look. Offering free product samples is neither new nor terribly revolutionary as an idea—except perhaps for the nonprofit theatre community! Much of the power of Free Night lies in its national scope: theatres all around the country, opening their doors to newcomers for free. The implementation of that plan—so simple and yet so effective—has offered, in the initiative’s first four years, literally tens of thousands of new patrons the opportunity to walk through our theatres’ doors. And because Free Nighters are by-and-large demographically and psychographically primed to become paying patrons, getting them through the door starts a ball rolling that brings over two-thirds of them back through the doors within six months.

Along with the hoped-for goals of increasing awareness and building new audiences, there are a host of benefits that have emerged from Free Night that were never envisioned as part of the program. LA Stage Alliance has been strengthened by corporate sponsorships in a way that it wasn’t able to realize before. The same grant that funded the creation of this guide, generously provided by the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation to Theatre Bay Area, has also allowed for a groundbreaking study into the intrinsic impact of live theatre on patrons. And more, and more.

In some ways, Free Night is a jumping-off point for something still to be imagined in the future. It is an initiative conceived to be so flexible that it can be enacted as written or completely re-configured to address the specific demands of the widely diverse

resident theatres across America. However Free Night evolves, and whatever new communities come on board, the national theatre community will undoubtedly be changed by the success of this unprecedentedly collaborative initiative. The national community will be a little more united, a little more savvy, and a little more confident of its own capacity for success because of the lessons learned from Free Night of Theater.

- Clayton Lord, San Francisco, June 2009

THANKS AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The following individuals and organizations contributed their thoughts, time and/or energy to the creation of this guide. Without them, it would not be nearly as complete as we hope it is.

Ben Cameron and **Lillian Osei-Boateng**
and the **Doris Duke Charitable Foundation**

Brad Erickson and **Karen McKeivitt**, Theatre Bay Area

Teresa Eyring and **Phillip Matthews**, Theatre
Communications Group

Program Researchers

Marc Shugoll, Shugoll Research (Bethesda, Maryland)

Alan Brown, WolfBrown (San Francisco, California)

Atlanta

Jessyca Holland

Austin

Latifah Taormina, Austin Circle of Theaters

Jessica Thompson, Austin Circle of Theaters

Chicago

Ben Thiem, League of Chicago Theatres

Connecticut

Jacques Lamarre, formally with TheatreWorks Hartford

Dallas

Greg MacPherson, City of Dallas, Office of Cultural Affairs

Los Angeles

Douglas Clayton, LA Stage Alliance
Terence McFarland, LA Stage Alliance
Rick Bernstein, Colony Theatre
Selene Santiago, Cornerstone Theater
Michael Betts, Musical Theatre West
Scott Werve, Range View Productions

New York City

Ruth Eglsaer, TCG/Free Night NYC
Linda Jacobs, Public Relations Director, TCG

North Carolina

Angie Hayes, North Carolina Theatre Conference

San Francisco Bay Area

JP Hitesman, Theatre Bay Area
Jeanette Harrison, AlterTheater
Randy Taradash, American Conservatory Theater
Barbara Wichmann, Artemia Communications
Robert Sweibel, Berkeley Repertory Theatre

Seattle

Karen Zeller-Lane, Theatre Puget Sound
Sam Read, Theatre Puget Sound
Jake Groshong, Balagan Theatre
Gregory Magyar, Edmond Driftwood Players
Beth Raas, Ghost Light Theatricals
Naho Shioya, Langston Hughes Performing Arts Center
David Hsieh, ReAct Theatre
Keith Dahlgren, Seattle Public Theatre

Katie Jackman, Seattle Repertory Theatre
Jeff Fickes, Seattle Shakespeare Company
Kathy Hsieh, SIS Productions
Daytona Strong, Taproot Theatre Company
Andrew McMasters, Wing-It Productions

Utah

Heidi Falk, NowPlayingUtah.com/Utah Arts and Cultural Coalition