Expanding your universe:  
How to grow an audience for your planetarium

Defining Your Purpose

Fulldome theaters vary widely in goals and level of activity depending on where they are located, the nature of their communities, and the resources available to them. Everyone wants to build a bigger audience. But before you start thinking about strategies, the first critical step is to look at your “purpose for being.” What are you about? What is your key message? How do you want to be defined by the community? Why should people care about you?

Your identity needs to be clear, and, most of all, valued to your target audience. Once you know that mission, you can begin to craft a strong and succinct message about your significance to the community. I’m not necessarily talking about the official-sounding “mission statement” because, as valuable as they can be, they often contain formal-sounding language that sounds like it was written for a grant application. You need to interpret and distill that into an exciting and eloquent message that the public will embrace. Some of the best messages I’ve seen incorporate the idea of “fun” with whatever their purpose of enlightenment may be.

Who is Your Audience?

It’s important to do some research to find out who your primary audience is. Looking at the statistics of who has come to you in the past is valuable, i.e., public numbers compared to school visits, demographics, how many are families, etc. But there may be some potential in other non-traditional groups that haven’t been explored before. What would they come to see in your dome? This is where market research can be valuable.

Surveys and polls can give you some useful data, but be sure they are professionally written and that you know how to interpret the results. They won’t tell you everything, but they can help give you some ideas on who to target in your promotional efforts, especially if you’re looking to try something new.

Advertise the “full experience”

What makes you unique? Be careful about letting yourself be branded as simply a “movies in the round” facility. If you only advertise “shows” and then herd people in and out of the dome like a movie theater with little or no interactive content then you’re setting people up to compare you to that medium.

This should be a part of the carefully-crafted message about who you are. An audience needs to feel like they came to see something unique and special. Many dome theaters and planetariums now offer bonus experiences with their shows. A well-presented introduction to the theater, a special prologue to the program, and/or added vignettes about current events and hot topics. These add a personal human touch to the experience that helps audiences feel more engaged and valued.

Most importantly, make sure you present yourself as genuinely interested in and sincerely passionate about what you’re doing.

Another factor in determining that “experience” is to understand your competition. There can be many museum and cultural entities that may cooperate and coordinate with one another but still represent competition for leisure activity. Positioning yourself as unique among those choices ensures that your community will see you as a place to get an extraordinary experience.

The networks of promotion

There are lots of ways to develop greater awareness of the programs and activities your theater is offering. One of my favorite marketing experts, Lindsie Smith at the Clark Planetarium (Salt Lake City, Utah), once said: “It is a basic marketing principle that it takes seven ‘touches’ before someone will internalize and/or act upon your call to action.”

Today those points of contact have to go beyond the traditional promotions like paid media. Paid advertising is still important to promote key events and can help generate the word-of-mouth that you’ll need to spread through the community. But now you can connect through other methods as well, allowing you to reach people from many angles. All of these avenues, combined with repetition, are key to staying on the radar screen of potential audiences.

What are some of these networks?

TV, radio and print. Get to know people in those media outlets! It won’t happen by simply sending out a news release and then hoping they pick something up. Follow up those announcements with phone calls and develop a relationship with them. Find out what their interests are and be able to explain why your program is worthy of media attention. Be able to show the “local interest” in your story wherever possible. Invite them to come over for a preview, a tour, or even a feature story about your place. And be prepared by having images and (where appropriate) HD video clips available for your programs or events.

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Email. Building an email subscriber list is powerful (maybe even more so than social media) because these are your proven fans. Having an occasional (once or twice a month) short enewsletter or alert is more likely to be seen in a targeted email to this group than through social media posts (but don’t underestimate the reach of social media either). When you do post an email, it needs to be brief, high quality and attractive. It should have:

- Exclusive information
- Good design
- High value: Actionable, to-the-point, and personable (more than just facts)

Social Media. Choose wisely. You don’t need a presence on every platform. Choose only the ones that you have time to manage well. Sites like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram can be good for connecting with your potential audience, but know how to use them effectively. If you only get on to post what looks like advertising posters, then it’s going to start feeling like spam to your audiences.

Social media is about being “social,” so give them some personality! Tidbits and insights about what you think, inside peeks at what you’re doing, special events related to your mission. Post things of such interest that they’ll want to share it with their friends. Do some occasional paid ads when you have something big to promote or to grow your email list. The post should take no longer than 8 seconds to read, should always have a visual, and a call to action with a link. Don’t post too often or it becomes “white noise” (about four times a week on Facebook is a good average).

Website. This is something you can control, and you need to have strategies for driving targeted traffic to your site. Get your site listed on others, like community event calendars, astronomy clubs, media stations, colleges, etc. Make your content there well laid out, easy to find, and engaging. Be visual and entertaining. Have concise descriptions that entice interest and action. Give people opportunities to “learn more” (don’t try and cram too much on your home page). Have it professionally designed so it can be easily maintained and updated in house.

Blog. This is another avenue for reaching people with targeted interests. It helps to expand your online presence and establish you and your institution as an expert source. It’s another fun and creative outlet for you, your staff and your audiences.

Cross promotion with local events and businesses. Find festivals and vendors with whom you can cooperate on advertising. If there is an arts, music, or cultural festival, see if you can advertise or even sponsor to get visibility. You can return the favor by putting their literature or other promotions at your facility. Maybe a music club with video screens would be willing to play promos of your shows? Or have postcards worth a discount to your music show? You can get creative here.

Build relationships in your community. People are more likely to come and try something new if a friend is encouraging and promotes community involvement. Give presentations to and join local organizations. You need to put a “face” on your organization!

Staying On Track

There is a lot of competition out there for leisure activities. Pay attention to what’s going on in your community and see how you can be a part of it. Bringing in a show with local interests is one thing, but you can do more with special events that involve local talent, whether that be scientific, artistic, musical, or cultural.

Get as much feedback from as many different people as you can. Polls and surveys are good, but be sure and get to know your community leaders, educators, business owners, and interact with the general public as much as you can. Ask questions and carefully listen to the answers. Connect with people socially as well as professionally. And by all means, have fun and show some enthusiasm for what you do! ☀️

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