Planetariums need to build and engage audiences to survive

By Michael Daut
Board Member
IMERSA
msdaut@gmail.com

When I joined the planetarium industry in 1999, I had come from the world of live theater, film, television, and education (having also served as an adjunct faculty member in the Media Communications Department at my alma mater, Webster University in St. Louis). I had no formal teaching experience when I was called on to be a college professor, so I used what I knew about engaging audiences to engage my students.

As an adjunct professor and a working professional in the entertainment industry, I leveraged my professional background in an attempt to captivate my students. I wanted to be that professor who connected my students to the material I was presenting—kind of like Mr. Keating, the private school teacher who Robin Williams brought to life in the movie Dead Poets Society. I wanted to inspire them, so I used humor, current examples from film and television, and group projects to inspire passion and love of the material I was teaching.

My experiment worked. I could see from my students’ faces their level of engagement, and my end of semester evaluations reflected this success.

Connecting entertainment and education

This experience taught me the indelible and essential connection between entertainment and education. When a speaker, teacher, or performer stands in front of a group of people to offer them something, the presenter “takes the stage” and the group or individual becomes the audience. That’s how it works, and how it has worked ever since our ancestors told stories around a campfire. This relationship between the performer and the audience allows the presenter to draw from centuries of stagecraft and entertainment industry experience to hook, hold, and transform their audiences. This is the key to success.

As I began to understand the DNA of the planetarium community, I was constantly amazed to see how much resistance there was to anything that sounded like it was based in entertainment or inspired by Hollywood. I had the unique privilege of being on the ground floor of the creation of the digital fulldome medium, a spectacularly immersive canvas for telling stories that surround audiences in an unprecedented way. This powerful medium for all kinds of storytelling across limitless topics from education to entertainment was siloed into planetariums and science centers with a very narrow range of topics and essentially a single genre—astronomy—and later, general science.

This is an unpopular, but no less true, statement: the fact that many domes are cloistered in science institutions has prevented the medium from realizing its true potential, has limited the types of stories it can tell, and has held it back from being embraced and loved by the general public. This applies to giant screen film domes as well as digital domes. It would be as if television, when it was invented, was only found in hospitals. Imagine the type of programming that would have been produced with this severe limitation, and how our favorite binge-worthy shows would not even exist today.

Fulldome as a creative and educational medium

Fulldome is a medium that is as adaptable as cinema or television. There is virtually no story that cannot be told on this immersive canvas, yet the variety and diversity of stories that have been told is seriously limited. Add to this the fact that there is a strange misconception that any pre-produced content that is created for a digital dome theater cannot be called a “movie,” since that moniker evokes entertainment. Because they reside in planetariums and science institutions, this idea implies that domes must educate first. If they happen to entertain as well, that’s fine, but entertainment value is a distant consideration, and certainly not the objective. The industry’s focus on education almost to the exclusion of entertainment has led to some unhealthy and potentially terminal practices that must be understood...
and addressed if the fulldome medium has any chance of continued success.

Furthermore, solutions are not that difficult to implement, and if put into practice, they can revive the health of the fulldome environment and establish a better destiny for the entire fulldome community. The biggest challenge is creating a paradigm shift in mind set, and it is up to the community to embrace this shift for the sake of a better future. This article is an attempt to shed light on the problem and to offer a fresh perspective as a catalyst for transformation.

The concern
As stated earlier, for a long time, there has been a visceral reaction from some in the planetarium community against anything that sounds like it came from the entertainment world. This manifests itself in various ways: “Planetarium shows are not ‘movies!’” and “We’re educators, not button-pushers.”

There are people who treat the planetarium as a holy sanctuary that must educate audiences to the exclusion of entertainment. It’s as if the planetarium has this vibe that anything entertaining cannot be educational, or that entertaining content distracts from the planetarium’s educational mission. That’s rather ironic because there’s also been this long-echoed wish among many planetarians that they could have the Hollywood budgets, to be like Star Wars or Star Trek or other blockbusters that attract audiences.

It’s also ironic because in wishing for that, today, new theaters do have fantastic digital systems that can help domers provide educational, entertaining content (real-time or pre-rendered) that will attract, build, and keep audiences.

Please don’t misunderstand. Education is a noble goal, and it can happen in many ways in the dome, from live presentations to fulldome videos. In fact, the immersive dome environment itself can be an outstanding source of inspiration that will encourage guests to engage in a lifetime process of learning. Understanding what a dome presentation can and can’t do will go a long way to help us rethink uses for the theater and how it can best inspire lifelong learning.

A majority of facilities recognize that they need good fulldome video content, want to give good live shows, and work toward those goals within whatever budgets they have. For them, entertainment and education go hand in hand. They realize that we have to give our audiences a good time. If they do, then audiences come back. Word of mouth brings in new audiences as people evangelize about the great time they had at the planetarium seeing a show about black holes or exoplanets or coral reefs or a little cat who goes to the moon.

For a subset of people who produce for fulldome and/or who realize that live shows need to have good entertainment value, too, the concept of drawing inspiration from feature films is not an alien one (pun intended). It’s one that says to them: “Give people a good time, even as you are teaching them something, and they’ll come back again and again. And, they’ll tell their friends.”

This is a healthy way to operate. Audience is important. Without audience, domes wouldn’t be here. That’s true regardless of whether they’re in schools or in informal education venues. Think about the best teachers you ever had: they were probably inventive, entertaining, and memorable because they could find ways to excite you about the topic. Right?

Customizing the approach
In schools, the audiences are pretty well defined, and planetarium educators are teaching within curriculum guidelines. Some domes use a variety of content, including video and live presentations. They work to satisfy the multiple requirements under which they operate.

In the informal environment, there’s more leeway, but we’d like to think that good production values would be appreciated under all domes, regardless of mandate. Remember, inspiration, not formal education, is the goal. Inspired audiences will seek out additional information on the internet, watch other documentaries on the topic, follow influencers and experts on social media, and so on. This exciting result should be our ultimate goal, and this can only be achieved when we offer engaging and entertaining experiences under the dome.

Unfortunately, all too often planetarium facilities select content based on price rather than effectiveness in building an audience. We need to understand that when we fail to consider audience impact, we are tearing down our institution, not building it up. It is the same as poisoning our own water supply. If we provide poor or underwhelming experiences for our audiences, they will have a bad experience. They won’t come back, and will tell their friends not to bother coming either. This is a recipe for disaster. Sadly, this is happening way too frequently.

What’s the competition?
Something to keep in mind as we make and use fulldome productions is that all of us in the domes have competition from outside. This is particularly true in the informal arena. There are many other things people can do with their time besides come to the planetarium. Think about this: most of us have screens in our pockets and on our wrists. Those deliver content 24/7, with a constant input of streaming media. We are adapting to that.

In truth, we don’t have to go out of our homes to do a lot of things we used to do. Audience members could simply stay home and get all the info about the Hubble Space Telescope (for example) that they could get at the planetarium. Or, they could watch Netflix and enjoy films, art programs, or dance concerts. Why leave home? Whatever is “out there” in our domes has to be pretty compelling to attract an audience at all, doesn’t it?

Keeping it relevant
If planetariums are going to continue to be relevant against this constant backdrop of media access, we in the domed community need to take some advice from entertainment industry, but also from history. We need to understand what appeals to audiences.

For “Hollywood” media, the biggest indicator of what appeals is in the box office (but this isn’t always an indicator of the quality of a (Continues on next page)
film). If people pay to attend something, it shows up in the box office.

Of course, not all domes charge admission, so think of it this way: the success of a show is reflected in the audience sizes, the numbers of people who come back to see it, or bring their friends and family to see it.

We should define metrics we can use consistently to measure our domed success. Box office is only one way, but not the most important in many places. Our focus is audience impact, and we should find ways to evaluate our effectiveness in achieving this goal.

**Engage audiences**

As with Hollywood, if domers (mostly at the informal venues) ignore audience, it’s at our own peril. Audiences are the lifeblood of our theaters. Without an audience we have nothing, and if our audience is not growing, we are dying—either slowly or quickly.

Ultimately our success or failure depends on our audience. And, they won’t show up if we don’t engage them. If you have a shrinking audience, adding more and better science alone without learning and implementing what engages your audience, you will fail.

The priority and focus has to change for theaters to be truly viable. It’s time to learn to entertain our audiences again. This means spending money on good movies and on marketing to let the audience know what you have to offer them. For those facilities where admission is charged, audience engagement potentially can transform a theater from a cost center to a revenue center. (Even if this is not necessarily true for those in schools, think about those students who delivered positive evaluations at the end of the semester—and consider what value that may have for school audiences.)

**Engage!**

There are some time-honored principles that fulldome theaters and producers can learn from the Hollywood production model. They help us embrace our audiences, entertain and educate, and be more effective. Best of all, they don’t pose a dichotomy between education and entertainment. Think about it: we learn from plays, movies, radio shows, podcasts, all sorts of media. Fulldome should be no different; it should embody both education and entertainment and do it in a way that gives audiences a memorable experience. As we know from educational research, memorability affects what audiences learn, and that’s a good thing.

So, what do we in fulldome do to engage our audiences? The answers need to be tailored for each facility, but in general, the most effective results come from show selection. This may mean investing in content that may be more expensive than you are accustomed to licensing. For some theaters, such expenses can be recouped through revenue share models, although those are problematic.

Incorporating a live presenter in the dome can also raise the excitement and impact of the show and give your theater an advantage as it attracts and builds a loyal following.

Beyond that, theaters need to engage in marketing. What that really means is reaching out to the communities they serve to present themselves as attractive, appealing, and relevant experiences. Once a theater does that, it then has to deliver an exceptional audience experience. And, that will almost always mean bringing fresh, entertaining, and educational experiences that people can’t get anywhere else.

Or course, there are folks in our community who do this already. They say, “Let’s consider doing something different and really reach out to our audiences.” This can be something as simple as licensing a piece of content that showcases music and art, or on a topic they don’t normally show, such as dinosaurs. Our fulldome community offers a wealth of possibilities. And, for those who can’t license shows, there are streaming options available.

In addition, taking a step toward expanding our vision to include audience preference means coming to an understanding of what audiences like and don’t like. We should not be afraid to ask these questions of our audiences through surveys, phone calls, member forums, or other creative means. When we review this feedback, we must be willing to adapt and change to increase our effectiveness.

**Support producers**

There is a small, delicate ecosystem of producers in the fulldome community who are very much in tune with what audiences want and like. Supporting their work is important. Not only are these producers the most obvious source of new content for our theaters, but their visions can help attract audiences hungry for new experiences. Our fulldome community benefits from producers who continue to expand the envelope of productions, who want to expand theater operators’ horizons.

However, many producers are struggling. Production budgets are low, and producers are getting beat up on pricing. They are competing with free content that may or may not be very good, but is popular because it’s free. And, if an independent producer invests a lot of their own money on a show, it’s very likely it will be years before they will see any return on investment.

Producers can’t work for free; they have families to feed and production to fund. And, they do it for a tiny fraction of what a typical Hollywood or PBS production spends on their lineup of stellar shows.

The fulldome community is very lucky to have these producers—some of whom have been part of our community for decades. Yet, there are challenges ahead and we may lose them if we don’t nurture their work.

The producers’ quandary is that there’s only so much they can afford to invest in a show because of the dynamics of the market. And, the less they invest, the less “bang” it has. Money talks, especially in production, and if we want good shows, we as a community need to find ways to support productions that help us bring in audiences.

Yet, there’s also a quandary on the theater side: some don’t have money to pay license fees. And if we want to get better content, to gain that “Hollywood” feel that so entices audiences, we need a heightened awareness of the ecosystem of producers, theaters, and audiences, and acknowledge that money does indeed drive the merry-go-round.

It all comes back to audience members. They motivate us to acquire new shows, to produce our own content, and to deliver live lectures that will delight and educate them. What audiences want and enjoy (and return for) should motivate theater administrations to re-examine the budgets they provide for show licensing.

In the long run, we need to look at planetariums in the future—a year out, ten years out. Will we embrace the kinds of productions that bring in audiences and also reflect the values we espouse in our domes about education and entertainment? That direction shows support for our producers, while at the same time showing respect for our audiences. There’s food for thought here, and we hope in a future piece to look more deeply at some marketing and outreach tactics that can help domes tackle these issues. Stay tuned!

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Michael Daut, formerly at Evans & Sutherland Corp. and Mousetrappe Studios in Burbank, California, now serves as an independent writer/producer/director in Los Angeles and part-time fulldome show distributor for K2 Studios. He is an IMERSA board member and maintains an active interest in the dome community and the content we show. He can be reached at: msdaut@gmail.com.