STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION IN CULTURE – ANALYSIS 
AND COMMUNICATION RECOMMENDATIONS FOR 
CROATIAN NATIONAL THEATRE IN ZAGREB

Original Scientific Paper

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Summary

The Croatian National Theatre (CNT) in Zagreb is the oldest and central theatre institution in Croatia. Considering its complexity, the theatre has the imperative to use decisive public relations activities since it is forced to simultaneously communicate with various publics and stakeholders. The Opera, one of the three theatre program components, continuously records high attendance and thereby is forced to interact with a demanding and specific audience. Based on the presumption that the CNT Opera has no formal communication strategy, the authors of this paper analyze the attitudes, habits and communication needs of the Opera audience compare it to current communication practices. With a survey conducted among the Opera audience of the CNT in Zagreb, the authors analyze the attitudes and opinions of the Opera audience, and based on these findings, suggest one of the possible approaches to the future communication of the CNT in Zagreb. Besides the conclusion that passive communication without a strategic approach dominates throughout the institution, the authors articulate the need for a long-term approach to the younger population that would broaden the current CNT Opera audience. The authors have also drafted recommendations for the long term strategic enhancement of the Opera Department of the Croatian National Theatre in Zagreb.

Keywords: public relations, strategy, culture and arts, opera, Croatian National Theatre in Zagreb
1. Introduction

Although culture and art are not considered as classic market products (in the sense of a primary activity), numerous authors agree that culture and art are an important market factor in the 21st century because they employ a large number of people, generate considerable income and profit, contribute to the economic development of society and they are often an intricate part of a more complex tourist package of products that a certain destination or country offers to the increasingly demanding tourist market (Aleksić, Alfirević, Pavićić, 2006, 17).

Cultural policy in the Republic of Croatia is still under the strong influence of the former Yugoslav system, which implies public financing of cultural institutions along with complete coverage of the overhead expenses of the institution. Cultural institutions are becoming more focused on the end consumer, the consumer of the cultural products. They try to build long-term relations with the audience through integrated communication that implies the use of more than just marketing activities (Obradović, Bogdanović Medo, 2010, 75).

The actual work done by a PR professional in art and culture is very similar to that done by any other PR practitioner, but there are certain distinctions. The specific market expects creativity and innovation, monitoring and creating trends and adapting to the social context in which culture and art are perceived primarily as fun; a reflection of one's lifestyle. Beresfort and Fawkes (2009, 671) define the sector of culture and art in public relations in the following manner: The input public (composers, playwrights) secures the resources transformed by the internal public (performers, management, and support staff) into useful services or products (performances, educational programs). The intermediate public (PR and marketing agencies, critics) then presents these services to the consumer public (audience, media).

Cutlip, Center and Broom (2003, 526) view the role of public relations in the majority of non-profit organizations through five tasks. The first is to gather support for the mission of the organization. The second is to develop the communication channels with the publics the organization serves, while the third is to create and maintain a favorable climate for gathering resources. The fourth task is encouraging development of public policies that would be favorable to the organization and its mission. And finally, the fifth task is to inform and motivate the key publics of the organization to commit to the set goals of the organization and to support them productively.
When rating the success and financial sustainability of a cultural product (performance, play), one of the crucial goals of any cultural institution is ticket sales. Sales are increased through promotional campaigns, advertising, informing the public when a play can be seen and through similar service information. Public relations have the task to create a story that the media will relay to the public, which in turn attracts the audience. Identifying and knowing the target audience is elementary in order to generate increased sales and successful communication. Cultural institutions often use traditional marketing and, more precisely, promotional activities to present their programs and projects to their audience, but also to the general public. Public relations activities usually come down to: (1) proprietary publications (printed, audio and video, online), (2) systematic monitoring of the media, (3) organization of special events – press conferences, premieres, banquets, season opening/closing, panels, (4) meetings with stakeholders (financiers, donors, sponsors), (5) maintaining contacts with the representatives of the media, (6) crisis communication (Beresfort, Fawkes, 2009, 675).

Digitalization, especially the increase of individuals who use the Internet and Facebook on a daily basis, offered new possibilities of two-way communication. These new technologies changed the way cultural institutions communicate with their audience from the ground up, or to say it better, new technologies changed how consumers of cultural products get informed and how they are communicated with. Besides the new ways of informing and communicating, new technologies have made a great impact on ticket sales – online reservations or online purchases. A cultural product, like any other, is becoming increasingly more susceptible to criticism, which indicates a clear need for systematic and strategic communication through online platforms. According to Beresfort and Fawkes (2009, 683), looking into the future is exceptionally important for public relations practitioners in culture and art. They are presented with the following demands: understanding the process of planning and management, knowledge of the tools and techniques specific for culture and art, insight into the specialized communication tools, understanding the desires and needs of the consumers – audience, monitoring trends, flexibility, accepting new trends and the realization that tools, channels and trends are constantly changed by technological advancement.
2. Strategic Approach to Communication in Culture

While creating the strategy of communication for institutions in culture and art, the same methods of pre-research are used. The analysis are the same as with creating the strategy of communication for companies, since they can be affected by political stability, regulatory frames, technological development, tourism, natural disasters, age and income structure of the population (Pavičić, Alfirević, Aleksić, 2006, 22).

After an internal and external analysis of the surroundings, an analysis of market niches and defining what makes the institution different, it is necessary to define the real role and position of public relations within the observed institution. The analysis of the surroundings provides an insight into the institution from three aspects: internal surroundings (mission, vision, and internal structure), public perception (reputation) and external surroundings (stakeholders). The main methods that can be used in research and success rating are (1) qualitative – in-depth interviews, focus groups and (2) quantitative – polls and media content analysis. In addition to that, PR practitioners use informal methods like internet and book research almost on a daily basis. A more frequently used formal method is based on content analysis and press clipping related to the observed institution and its program. Content analysis does not measure results directly, but rather indirectly since these results can only be viewed as an indicator of certain effects (Jugo, 2012, 86).

Besides market research, the main element of every successful communication strategy is planning. Planning can't help a badly envisioned program, but planning will mean a well thought-out program. The foundations of success are built if plans are directed at the appropriate individuals and the right communication tools are used and the right words are used at the right time, and everything within the agreed timeframe and budget (Gregory, 2009, 194).

Choosing strategy and tactics is the next step and at the same time the most complex part of public relations. The strategy is the foundation on which the tactics of the program is built and that altogether is the main idea of planning. It is the strategy that shows how to reach set goals, while the choice of tactics is the practical part of the communication plan which combines tool choice of the course of time. Jugo (2012, 155) makes the distinction of 4 basic strategy types in public relations. Creative strategy helps the institution to build up its image and reputation, gathering strategy is focused on increasing competitive advantages and effects, adaptation
strategy is guided by the principle of accepting change and upholding values, and defensive strategy confronts inaccuracies and adverse stances.

It is necessary to carry out an evaluation at the end of a program to precisely determine if the chosen strategy and tactics achieved the desired communication and business success. Evaluation is used to prove (in)efficiency, while it also encourages management and responsibility. The evaluation of the process of planning and communication determines if the program was managed in a capable manner and if it is within the budget and timeframe (Gregory, 2009, 215).

Traditional tactics in communication like media relations are extremely important although they often function based on the traditional model of one-way communication, sponsorships and donations, crisis management and communication and event management. Social network communication is drawing an increasing attention of PR practitioners. The standard tools of media relations used in cultural institutions are press conference, press briefing, press release, press tour (for example attending rehearsal before a premiere), theater visit, photo session, interview, public statement and so on. Production quality greatly influences media coverage, but it is also one of the major responsibilities of a proactive PR practitioner. Regardless of proactivity, PR practitioners in culture need to be aware that it is a to-way communication so the news won't be based solely on the information the institution wants to see in the public domain. A PR practitioner should not be persistent in seeking out exclusively positive publicity, but should also be prepared for the negative view of the institution in the media (Bailey, 2009, 334).

Crisis management and crisis communication in culture are often under the influence of political struggle and are rarely based solely on different views of artistic expression. Subjects that can be characterized as crisis, and that are prevalent in the media are mostly related to employment and taking over or keeping political influence over the institution. In that situation, cultural institutions don't have a lot of possibilities of a coherent communication towards external publics, because the matter is usually simple politics reflected badly on the institution. Sponsorship as a marketing tool is an appropriate niche for cultural institutions to position themselves as sponsorship recipients. Attracting sponsorship funds from private companies however is not simple, because those same companies expect something measurable in return – tangible marketing value. Many institutions from culture and art are used to long-term financial security (state budget) and they rarely embark on any activity that would potentially
secure additional funding. Implementing a percentage clause would be very motivational. In this case, state budget funds would only be approved after the institution had already secured a percentage of the funds from other sources (Pavičić, Alfirević, Aleksić, 2006, 258-263).

3. Public Relations of the CNT Opera in Zagreb

The Croatian National Theater in Zagreb is without a doubt one of the most important cultural institutions in the Republic of Croatia. It has 502 employees and on average about 4 thousand subscribers and as such is the appropriate example for research of applied public relations in cultural institutions in the country. This claim is further confirmed by data showing that the 240 plays in the theater season 2012/2013 were attended by 106 thousand viewers. Average attendance of all plays was 82% (HNK, 2012). The research focus in this paper is placed on the segment of Opera as one of the four components of this institution and activities carried out by the Office of sales, promotion and public relations in the sense of communication with its target publics. Opera is the leading segment with about 85% average attendance and surpasses the attendance of the remaining two segments – Ballet and Drama. Besides that, the Opera is the largest ensemble, its productions are the most expensive and the number of performers often exceeds one hundred, both on the scene and in the orchestra. The number of people included in the production of an opera performance is often greater than 200.

Opera production is considered as a somewhat luxury product, but not more than one quarter of production expenses can be retrieved through ticket sales. Regardless of high costs and the low percentage of opera consumers in the general population (2-3%), Opera needs to be economically and socially approachable because it has an important part of the civilization educator (Agid, Tarondeau, 2010, 2).

Various internal documents like the Booklets of the Croatian National Theater in Zagreb 1960-2000, that were available to the authors of this paper, show that the organizational unit in charge of public relations within the CNT, in the past, was the Administrative office for ticket sales. Those same documents also show that the terminology “public relations” in the most important theater house in Croatia only appears at the beginning of this century. For a long period of years the office that was in charge of public relations had the formal title “Office of propaganda and marketing”. Later, in 2004, the term “propaganda” was replaced and divided into three segments – sales, promotion and public relations. At the moment, public relations in the CNT
is performed by the Office of sales and promotions, although the workplace systematization defines a separate position “Public relations expert”. The aforementioned office employs three individuals, one for each component – Drama, Opera, Ballet (HNK, 2013).

The Office of sales and promotions is in charge of the following tasks which also includes a good deal of communication activities which are also a part of public relations (HNK, 2012a):

- Preparation and writing of press releases,
- Press conference organization,
- Writing and updating institution's website,
- Preparation and correction of all the institution's publications in cooperation with the editor (daily and monthly program, performance booklet, Opera newsletter, poster, flyer, internal announcement, season booklet, subscription flyer and so on),
- Day to day communication with both internal and external public,
- Organized group sales of tickets and direct work in the sales department,
- Organization of exhibitions, sponsored performances, after-performance party, book and movie presentations and so on,
- Organization of premieres and accompanying protocol,
- Acquiring sponsorships,
- Active attendance of all important events.

From the list of activities, it is clear that a single employee of the Office of sales and promotion (noted in the Systematization) is overburdened by the tasks intended to be done on a daily basis, basically leaving no time to create a long-term communication strategy of the Opera.

4. Research: Attitudes of the CNT Opera in Zagreb Audience

4.1. Methodology, Hypothesis and Research Sample

In the research portion of this paper, the authors have analyzed the attitudes and opinions of the Opera audience, and based on these findings, suggested one of the possible approaches to the future communication of the CNT in Zagreb. The following hypotheses were set:

H1: There is no clearly defined communication strategy in the CNT Opera in Zagreb.

H2: Communication tools used by the Opera are not adapted to the target audience of the Opera.
H3: The dominant age group in the Opera audience is within the 40 to 70 year old range.

The quantitative method was used in the conducted research. The survey carried out among the CNT audience analyzed interests, attitudes and the perception of the external public of the CNT in Zagreb. The external public is divided into three categories: CNT subscribers, Opera subscribers and Opera audience who are not subscribers. The survey was conducted among 2200 participants during January 2013.

4.2. Research Results

The research provided an insight into an exceptionally large amount of data. The following text shows a portion of that data that is the main field of research of this paper. The conducted research has shown that the majority of the first group of examinees, CNT subscribers, are female (64.9%), in the middle and older age group (49.3% are above 55 years of age), of secondary or higher education (56.8%), mostly retired (35.4%), with an average monthly gross earning between 3 and 5 thousand HRK (39%). Opera subscribers, members of the second group, are categorized by an even more prevalent female population (68.4%), of older age on average (57.1% older than 55), in great majority highly educated (higher education, college, master’s degree or PhD almost 70%), roughly equal number of retirees (36%), and with above average monthly gross earning (58% earn more than 5.000 HRK). To conclude, Opera subscribers are mostly highly educated women with above average income. The third group of examinees consists of women (52%), relatively younger than the former group (58% between the age of 25 and 54), mostly highly educated (higher education, college, master’s degree or PhD 60%), with a lower number of retirees (19%) and mostly with above average income (54% earn more than 5000 HRK a month).
Research results on the frequency of purchased subscription imply a low number of new subscribers, only 1.9% become CNT subscribers and only 2.1% become Opera subscribers. Both examined groups (first and second) consist of 92.2% regular subscribers and 89.1% Opera subscribers. The results showed the importance of the Opera segment: the majority of the CNT subscribers are interested in the Opera repertoire (38.7%), followed by Ballet repertoire (32.4%) and finally by Drama repertoire (23.1%). According to research results, Opera subscribers are more loyal than regular subscribers. 66.6% have confirmed they will re-subscribe, while only 45.2% CNT subscribers have said the same.

The most knowledge of music and opera was displayed by the Opera subscribers 34% of which are musically literate, 25.6% have shown knowledge of music history and 24.1% in music theory. The audience that attends opera performances has shown the least knowledge, most of which haven’t shown tangible knowledge of any of the above. An interesting result is related to the age of the first opera attendance. Over 30% of opera subscribers attended their first opera performance before they were 10 years of age. The majority of both groups have attended their first opera performance between the ages of 10 and 20 (39%), which clearly indicates a need to
“rejuvenate” subscribers in both categories. Opera subscribers (almost 70%) attended their first opera performance before their 20. birthday, while the age group of the audience that attends opera performances shows that only 20% of attendees are younger than 24 years of age. The number of young subscribers is even lower.

The audience attending CNT performances mostly expect good entertainment, opera subscribers expect a good musical performance, while theater subscribers expect socializing with the other audience members. The audience is mostly interested in operas that contain comical elements (51.5%), while theater and opera subscribers do not pay attention to the specific opera genre. All three groups do not prefer modern productions.

![Audience expectations when attending performances in the CNT in Zagreb](image)

**Graph 2: Audience expectations when attending performances in the CNT in Zagreb**

Considering communication, the results vary depending on the examined group. Over 53% of the audience prefers communication via emails, but at the same time 66% of CNT subscribers and 69% of opera subscribers prefer a more direct communication. The reason is likely that the audience is on average younger than both subscriber groups. The audiences have shown to be the most demanding when rating the quality of distribution of various promotional materials. There are also differences in the favored way of receiving the opera performance schedule. The audience is inclined to communication via emails, which is the least favored method of
communication of the other two groups. The latter prefer regular mail, which is in turn the least favored by the audience.

![Graph showing preferred way of communication of the audience with the CNT](image)

*Graph 3: Preferred way of communication of the audience with the CNT*

The examinees were also asked to note their first associations linked to the word “opera” via an open-ended question. The most frequent positive associations were: art, joy, pleasure, delight, happiness and luxury. The negative were: boredom, screaming, shouting, old-fashioned, time consuming, tiring. The examinees were also asked to provide suggestions on how to improve communication with the Office of sales and promotion. On this open-ended question the examinees answered relatively scarcely and only a few suggestions can be highlighted: slow communication with the personnel on the box office, short working hours of the info-center, lack of biographies of the soloists and the opera libretto, lack of the opera libretto on the official website, non-existent information on the duration of each act and the need for faster communication on the official Facebook page of the CNT in Zagreb.

The analysis of these results undoubtedly shows that the attendees of the performances of the CNT in Zagreb are of a more mature age and that the theater lacks younger audience. This indicates the need for certain activities to attract younger audience. The research has also shown a very small number of new subscribers, which, combined with the natural aging of the audience, presents a long-term problem in subscription sales. As expected, the least knowledge of opera was displayed by the audience group that infrequently visits the CNT in Zagreb. In
regards to the communication with the audience, the research shows that each group of examinees prefers a certain model of communication. That indicates that the subscribers and the audience require an individualized approach to communication. It is of great importance to know that the subscribers are more pleased with the methods of communication than the audience. Therefore, the latter requires quicker and more advanced methods of communication.

4.3. Discussion: A Premise for Setting Up the Communication Strategy of the CNT Opera

Although it would be logical to expect that such an important institution like the Croatian National Theater in Zagreb would have above average developed public relations, the conducted research shows that there is room for significant improvement that should result with a larger attendance of opera performances. The results of the survey unambiguously indicate lacking in the current method of communication. Although it is possible to point out a whole range of external publics of CNT in Zagreb, a special focus, within setting up a long-term communication, should be placed on the audience that is the most numerous and the most important segment of the external public, without which there would be no point to the existence of this cultural institution.

The basic division of audience as the most important part of the external public relates to the subscribers and audience that buys tickets in free sale. The subscribers can additionally be divided into frequent subscribers (those who regularly renew their subscription year after year), infrequent subscribers (former subscribers who come back from time to time, purchasing individual subscriptions) and finally, new subscribers – those who purchase a subscription for the first time. The audience that purchases tickets in free sale can be divided into loyal consumers (those who buy tickets often and are usually oriented towards a single theater segment – Opera, Ballet or Drama), occasional consumers who occasionally purchase tickets for any theater segment and the new audience that attends a performance of the CNT in Zagreb for the first time. The latter are usually attracted by a single exclusive repertoire title, a visiting artist or expected production.

By analyzing the existing communication tools and the tools used by the CNT Opera, from reliable sources, it is possible to notice that the Opera communicates with its audience in many different ways, using a number of tools like website, email, postcard, memo, flyer, and newsletter and by phone. In addition to that, the info center led by a student service, is always
available to the audience as additional help in communication. Opera attendees are given special attention via information on guest opera performances, introductions to opera performances, exhibitions, and chamber performances in the theater foyer and via a separate newsletter both in electronic and printed edition. A somewhat proactive communication with opera lovers is manifested in better sales results for opera performances in the last two observed seasons (HNK, 2012b). More room for improving communication is noticeable in media relations, as communication mediators between the Opera and the audience. Although the Opera repertoire is known one theater season ahead, media relations activities cannot be rated as planned or strategic and are used ad hoc.

Based on the results of the conducted research, it is possible to point out that the basic task, or goals of the communication strategy of the CNT Opera should be the popularization of opera and attracting younger audience. Considering the results that show a relatively low level of knowledge of music and opera, a majority of the activities in the strategy should be focused on educational programs.

The research has also undoubtedly shown that it is necessary to focus on the younger population and news consumers in the long-term. Therefore it is important to implement a clear editorial policy on all online communication platforms (website, Facebook, Twitter). Also it is necessary to adjust content and messages to individual target groups. It would be especially useful to use social networks to provide an experience that would urge the target audience to react, comment and engage. It is also necessary to implement the website in the English language due to the increasing number of foreign tourists visiting Zagreb. Activating additional online platforms like Tumblr, Instagram, Flickr, YouTube and Reddit would be beneficial, among which the YouTube channel is the most rational due to the increasingly present video content.

It would be desirable to link long-term communication strategy to a proactive strategy of audience participation. The authors of this paper consider that the highest value of consuming a cultural product is the experience of art. Thus, all the communication activities should be strongly linked to including target groups, especially into a two-way communication, and encourage them to participate in the creative process by any possible means. The result of such an approach would be receiving a lot of feedback that should in turn guarantee new insight into experiences, demands and wishes of the audience. Based on this valuable information, the communication strategy could be adjusted after every season or even during the very process of communication.
A common prejudice towards traditional cultural institutions is their exclusiveness. This problem can be solved by organizing an event like “Open Door Days” that could encourage two-way communication with the target groups like the audience and the subscribers. Such events can be very useful, but they cannot present the main communication platform towards all target groups (sponsors, donators, owners).

One of the options of a potential communication strategy is the implementation of educational programs. This possibility is clear due to opera knowledge deficit proven by the conducted research. It would be especially beneficial to organize and implement educational programs focused on children under the age of 10, since the research has shown that 30% of current opera subscribers have seen their first opera performance before reaching 10 years of age.

Finally, when defining the communication strategy frame, it is imperative not to forget about the media. Continuous usage of traditional tools like media briefing, but also of new tools like virtual press conferences could significantly improve the amount of press coverage. Establishing media partnerships could significantly improve media relations that at the moment seem inadequate for a theater institution like the CNT in Zagreb. Also, the management of the institution should consider implementing a separate department of communication, regardless of its name. That would create the possibility of additional development of this segment of such an important institution like the CNT in Zagreb.

5. Conclusion

After the conducted research, the analysis of the collected data and showing the possible improvements, it is possible to confirm the first hypothesis of this research that claims that the CNT Opera does not have a clearly defined communication strategy. This hypothesis can be confirmed by looking at the planned communication activities of the Opera that are mainly reduced to spreading information on the repertoire or the premieres, but also dedicated to the incomplete communication. The amount and the widespread types of tasks that the communication department is in charge of, based on internal documents, show that this approach is virtually impossible. Additional evidence of this claim is the non-existence of a communication strategy in any written form.

The above also confirms the second hypothesis which claims that the current communication tools are not adapted to the target groups of the Opera. This is especially visible when analyzing
audience satisfaction when communicating with the Office of sales and promotion, which shows that the communication does not make enough of a distinction between the target groups such as theater subscribers, opera subscribers and the audience. Each of the groups demands a tailored approach from the channel of communication to the content itself. The last hypothesis, related to the age structure of the Opera audience, has also been confirmed. The research has shown that the majority of the audience is between 40 and 70 years of age. However, the main reason management should be worried about is not the data above, but the declining number of new consumers that needs to be addressed in a proper manner.

The extremely low number of new consumers suggests that this theater institution has a permanent audience structure, which makes communication significantly easier in the present time. Namely, properly conducted research, as has been done for this paper, will discover the preferred ways of communication and enable the necessary adjustments. The major problem could appear in the long run, considering that the younger population does not have a pronounced habit of attending performances of the CNT Opera in Zagreb. With this trend in mind, the main challenge set before the communication personnel of the CNT as a whole, and the management of this fundamental cultural institution in Croatia, is finding a way to drastically modernize communication that is fully adjusted to a younger audience, with the goal of seriously triggering interest for this kind of art. The research conducted in this paper has clearly shown that the habits of consummation of this kind of art are developed at an early age. Therefore it is necessary to approach this activity strategically and in advance and already focus on the popularization with the younger audience. The efforts invested in today's communication will undoubtedly pay off in the future through the changing of the age structure of the CNT audience. However, changes to the traditional communication practices, and therefore the whole communication paradigm of such an important and serious institution, primarily require a strong will and cooperation of the top management of this institution. Only in that way is it possible to make the qualitative difference from the current way of communication.

6. Reference List


**Internet Sources**