

INDIANAPOLIS BUSINESS JOURNAL

TOM HARTON Commentary

Don't fear the young; e-mail them

You don't always see it or hear it, but it's there. The quiet panic that sets in after a theater company or a newspaper or any organization realizes it must begin appealing to a new breed of consumer if it wants to survive.

Young consumers of news want it in bite-size portions delivered to their desktops.

Young church-goers want dynamic worship services and activities to match, not tradition-bound church groups that require elections, officers, meetings and minutes.

And young patrons of the arts want a social experience they can learn from. Observing the art—in whatever form it takes—isn't enough. They want to meet the artist.

Offering what this demanding group wants is difficult enough, but it doesn't end there. You have to get them in the door, and you can't do it simply by running an ad in the local paper or buying time on radio or TV.

Ignoring the challenge isn't an option. Organizations—and cities—that don't meet the demands of young consumers will eventually wither and die.

Heavy stuff. Panic-inducing. And reason enough for the Arts Council of Indianapolis to swoop in with a \$125,000 study designed to help arts groups appeal to younger patrons but useful to any organization stumped by the consuming habits of people ages 20 to 40.

The Arts Council last year engaged the services of futurist Rebecca

Ryan and her company, Madison, Wis.-based Next Generation Consulting, to find out how to develop programming for and market to young Indianapolis audiences.

Among its findings, released earlier this year, are the following gems already being tested by local arts organizations:

Young patrons don't demand free events. They'll pay an average of \$22 to participate in something that involves learning, sensing and connecting with others.

Traditional advertising alone doesn't work with this group.

Recommendations from friends drive spending decisions.

Indiana Repertory Theatre is among the local arts organizations making use of the study, and the early returns are promising. The run of IRT's summer show, "Triple Espresso," produced by a Minneapolis theater company of the same name, has already been extended twice. Its fourweek run is now eight weeks, thanks largely to a marketing strategy built on the study's finding that word-of-mouth, often delivered electronically, is the primary way people age 20 to 40 learn about arts opportunities.

IRT packaged "Triple Espresso's" May 17 local premiere with a launch party for 160 people. The invitees—bloggers, hotel agents and other "in the know" types—were carefully selected by IRT's marketing staff, with help from Emmis Communications, to become "buzz agents" for the show.

IRT served up a good time, a good show and sent the buzz agents out into the world to tell 12 friends, in person or via e-mail, about what they'd seen.

Eventually, IRT probably would have stumbled upon some of the ideas itself, but about 80 percent of what IRT is working on from a marketing standpoint is a direct result of the Next Generation study, says Megan McKinney, IRT's 34-year-old senior marketing and public relations manager.

Among its 2007 goals are more face-to-face promotion and finding a way to make attending an IRT performance an experience that transcends the show itself.

"I think every business is going through this—unless you're MTV or Coca-Cola," says McKinney. "The worst reaction is to be afraid."

McKinney's assessment is on the mark. The quest to engage young adults isn't limited to the arts community. It's very much a business proposition. If you're not convinced, consider the origin of the arts-group study.

It was BioCrossroads, the cheerleader for the region's life sciences economy, that sought out Next Generation Consulting three years ago to learn how Indianapolis could draw more young scientists and entrepreneurs.

That connection led to the arts study, but the study isn't the only tangible result of BioCrossroads' youth movement. BioCrossroads is also behind Indy Hub, a not-for-profit founded a year ago to connect and energize the city's young professionals. The organization underwritten by BioCrossroads, the city and local employers, is already 1,300 members strong and has hosted half a dozen social events.

But Indy Hub has just scratched the surface, says its 30-year-old executive director, Molly Chavers, who's overseeing the launch of Indy Hub's new and improved Web site, which was scheduled to go live June 16 or 17.

The Web site—free, interactive and broad in scope—is intended to link 20- and 30-somethings with one another and with everything the city has to offer—from careers to entertainment to volunteer opportunities.

"If you live in New York or Chicago, it's not the city's fault if you can't make the right connections. But here, it's our fault. There hasn't been a hub to help people make those connections," Chavers said.

If your organization is struggling to connect with the new breed of consumer, don't panic. Check out IndyHub.org, or view a summary of Next Generation's Indianapolis arts study at Indyarts.org (check out research reports under the news and info pulldown). Learn what the young crowd wants, prepare to give it to them, and spread the word.

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NOTIONS

In search of happiness? You've got to make a friend

Bruce Hetrick

My brother Bryan called the other day. He asked if I'd like to join him at the Music Mill to see an up-an-coming singer-songwriter he'd heard about. He said the critics have compared her rock-funksoul sound to the likes of Bonnie Raitt, Tina Turner and Janis Joplin.

Pretty high praise.

So last Tuesday we 40-something guys and a few hundred other people went to hear 22-year-old Grace Potter and the Nocturnals.

Before Grace took the stage, we sat in the back row, sipping drinks and catching up on family news.

Bryan said he's looking forward to getting out of the house and starting his new job, working for Uncle Sam at Fort Ben. He said there are lots of benefits plans to choose from, so it's pretty confusing.

He said my niece Emma's a little miffed at her brother, Nate, 'cause he's more interested in his girlfriend than his siblings right now.

He said my nephew Cole is spending all his time gazing at the fish in the new fish tank he got from the neighbors. We talked about what kind of fish Cole chose, but I didn't recognize the species.

I gave Bryan an update on my sons' summer jobs. We agreed on a game plan for Father's Day. Then the lights went down for Grace Potter's opening number. With drums, base and rhythm guitar backing her up, Potter moved smoothly from organ to electric guitar, belting out rock ballads of lovers' strife and shattered dreams, rocky relationships and a soulful search for God. After an hour or so, she brought down the house with an a cappella-into-rock into a cappella rendition of her new album's title song, "Nothing but the Water." Potter sang:

I have fallen so many times For the devil's sweet, cunning rhymes
And this old world Has brought me pain But there's hope For me again.

And while the band that followed Potter had the crowd dancing in the aisles, my old ears had had all they could handle. So I left Bryan to his proverbial quest for autographs and headed home, happy to have heard an emerging talent, happy to have had a brief brotherly bonding experience. At home, my friend Cheri was happy, too. After weeks of research and writing, she'd finished the first draft of the research paper assigned by her social work professor. She'd decided to study happiness—

various theories on why some seem to be happier than others and whether belief in things spiritual affects that. I asked if I might read it and Cheri readily agreed, providing I wouldn't be too hard on her. It was, after all, a first draft. So I read and learned. I learned about genetic influences on happiness. (There may, indeed, be some.) I learned about economic influences on happiness. (It turns out that after our basic needs are met, more money doesn't equal more happiness. In other words, the Beatles were right when they sang, "Money can't buy me love.")

I learned about nation-of-residence influences on happiness. (Contrary to popular belief, reinforced by a self-declared inalienable right to pursue happiness, the U.S. of A. does not have an exclusive.)

I also learned that, while all these factors may affect our satisfaction or dissatisfaction on this planet, the contributor of all measured contributors to our happiness is the quality of our human relationships—friends, family lovers, neighbors, co-workers, etc. In a nutshell, folks who have healthy relationships with other folks tend to be happier than those who—by choice or by circumstance—go it alone.

Guess that's why rock-funk-soul singers like Grace Potter prefer to pen ballads about relationships gone astray more often than they sing of scornful scandals or political misdeeds.

And why little girls miss big brothers with a sudden interest in romance

And why little boys stare at fish that always have time to stare back.
And why aging brothers relish rock concerts with artists young enough to be their children.

That happiness is grounded in relationships may also hold the key to attracting and retaining people in less-than-popular places.

A few weeks ago, I ran into Anne Shane of Indianapolis' Biocrossroads. She is also a founder of this city's Indy Hub, a network of young professionals.

Shane and I got to talking about Indy Hub, and I asked how it happened to emerge from an economic-development organization centered on life sciences.

She explained yet another research study—one showing that if new folks in a community fail to form rewarding relationships within 90 days, they're far less likely to stick around for the long haul. So Indy Hub was established to make those relationships easier to find and form in a Midwestern metropolis striving to set itself apart via human connections.

So, if you're unhappy and you know it, don't spend your time with the mirror. Use a lifeline. Phone a friend. Or at least buy a Grace Potter CD.

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