



Fundraising Tips

Success stories and ideas on how to raise funds

Contributors:

Keith Martin, Managing Director, Richmond Ballet
Rob Prescott, Former SETC Resource Development Chair
Gregg L. Parker, reprint on B. Dwayne Craft, AL High School Teacher

Fund Raising Tips, by Keith Martin

When our daughter's high school advanced to the state festival, we started putting the fundraising wheels in motion in case we were fortunate enough to be selected to go to the regional festival at the SETC Convention. The total price tag for us was \$12,000 of which we ultimately raised over \$17,500. Here are some basic rules -- ideas to get you started -- but please take them with a grain of salt since they had varying degrees of success.

- Rule #1 - Forget bake sales, car washes, raffles, auctions or yard sales; they are too labor intensive and yield too small a return on the investment of time and resources.
- Rule #2 - Hit the media -- hard! We got three major articles, including a great piece in *The Charlotte Observer* about winning the state festival and comparing it to the state football championship, along with a Sunday Arts piece (with photo) about the SETC Festival.
- Rule #3 - BEG, shamelessly! At our request, the local paper put a sidebar at the end of the article that read something like: "WANT TO HELP? Northwest School of the Arts needs to raise another \$6,000 to represent the State of North Carolina and send its production to SETC. Contributions can be made payable to the NWSA Drama Boosters and sent to...." It generated over \$1,500 in miscellaneous donations.
- Rule #4 - If you can get permission from the publisher or author's representative, use your show to raise money locally. If there are feeder elementary or junior high schools that will send graduates to your program, offer to perform your "State Championship Play" at their campus to demonstrate the high caliber programs that await them when they matriculate to your school. We charged a dollar per head and/or got the PTA's to make a contribution to our cause.
- Rule #5 - Go to your school board. We arranged to have the cast and crew recognized for their achievement at a School Board meeting (broadcast on local cable) and casually mentioned our fundraising plight. They responded with a \$5,000 grant to offset our expenses. The money came from a program for exceptional children (a la *Odyssey of the Mind*, etc). Since all but one of our students qualified as gifted and/or talented (ergo: exceptional), we qualified for funding. And the broadcast brought more small gift contributions from viewers (see #3 above).
- Rule #6 - Talk to your state theatre association. The North Carolina Theatre Conference presented \$500 to the play that would represent the state at SETC.
- Rule #7 - Ask your local or state arts council for help. We got a one-time, non-reoccurring "opportunity grant" of \$2,500 from the Arts and Science Council here in Charlotte. Even better, they issued it in the form of a challenge grant to help us leverage funds from the general public ("your tax-deductible contribution will be matched dollar for dollar...").
- Rule #8 - Hold a benefit prior to leaving for SETC. Bill it as an "Encore Performance" with proceeds underwriting your trip to the convention. If you can get a lead gift (say \$500 or so), make a curtain speech saying that you have a donor who has pledged up to \$500 if an equal amount is raised from audience members at tonight's performance..." It works every time!
- Rule #9 - Go to the corporate community, BUT remember, "People give to people, not organizations." So first, find out the place of employment of your students' parents (both of them) along with their job titles, and then enlist their assistance in your fundraising efforts. Many, if not most businesses, have giving policies that prohibit contributions unless there is a direct tie to their firm. Parents count as that mandatory tie-in!
- Rule #10 - Use in-kind contributions to reduce your cash expenses. If the right person does the asking, they rarely say no. Think about what items you are paying for out of your pocket (van rental for cast, truck rental for set, dry cleaning for costumes, etc) and then get it donated. For example, we received a round-trip airline ticket from US Airways for our musical director who had to fly in and out of Jacksonville since she couldn't stay for the entire conference.

Developing Resources for Festivals, By Robert Prescott

At the just concluded SETC Fall Meetings, the issue of supporting festival productions came up as a topic for discussion as a serious issue. It seems that the cost of mounting a production for consideration at the state level, and consequently the cost of advancing a winning production to SETC, and in the case of community theatre, possibly advancing to the national level, can sometimes appear so overwhelming as to preclude serious consideration by a number of organizations.

In truth, there are numerous creative methods by which cost can be effectively contained, and subsequently, actual costs can be covered by tapping into traditional funding sources as well as employing creativity and ingenuity. Not all of the suggestions addressed here will be effective for all organizations, but all organizations have the capability to succeed in funding festival productions.

As a beginning, there is the process of selecting an appropriate piece of work for consideration to take to your state festival. Just as we prepare a budget for all of our in house productions, so too must we put together a budget for a festival entry. This must and should be our first step. After all, over and above the usual productions costs such as set, costume, lighting and props, we must remember that we will need to pay for accommodations and travel for our cast and crew. Therefore, a production that has a cast of thirty and a crew of ten will be a very expensive proposition. State festival organizations do their best to secure affordable housing for festival participants, but this will still be a considerable expense for the organization coming to the festival.

Then of course there is the travel expense, which depends on distance and mode of transportation. Whether to fly, rent a van or a bus, or pay mileage are matters for serious consideration. There is also the cost of getting the various production elements to the festival. Unless you're doing a two-person show with just beach chairs for your set, you will almost certainly need to rent a truck.

The important thing to keep in mind at this point is that it can be done! Let us explore some possibilities, some obvious, others perhaps not.

No matter what community you live in, you have loyal and dedicated patrons. These folks buy your season tickets, attend your productions, and applaud your work. These people want you to succeed. And we should always remember that you and your organization are part of the fabric that is community pride.

With this in mind, consider a couple of possibilities. As you are putting together your festival entry, perhaps you can fill up your house of 250 seats for rehearsals at \$2.00 per person. Your patrons might find the process of considerable interest, especially if you take time for a discussion between your cast and audience. This will not only serve to raise \$500 per rehearsal to cover some expenses, but also to further the bond between your organization and your patrons.

You may wish to consider a separate donor category of festival supporter in addition to the other categories of support that you offer your patrons. It is possible that this is something that people who are not otherwise moved to contribute might be enticed. It may sound farfetched, but remember, everybody has their "button".

Hold one or more fund raising performances of your festival production, as it will be performed at festival. In the case of community theatre, be sure to include the setup, breakdown, and adjudication. This will give your patrons a fuller understanding of the process, and it will create an interest in following your success as you proceed through the festival. Utilizing the same hypothetical 250-seat house at say, \$5.00 per person will produce \$1,250 toward your festival expenses.

You might even want to conduct a raffle with the prize being an opportunity for one or two people to travel with you to the state festival. Remember, people love to win stuff!

When I was managing director for the Manatee Players in Bradenton, Florida, we took a production of "Forever Plaid" to the state festival. We covered our expenses by presenting our festival entry in a dinner theatre format at a local restaurant. We sold out two shows in the same night in a restaurant that sat 100 people and netted \$5,000 for our trip to the state festival.

Conducting a raffle during your main stage productions is another way to raise funds, as are activities such as bake sales, car washes, yard sales, and the list goes on and on.

It is also important to remember here that there other funding opportunities as well. Consider applying for a grant from your state, county, or local arts council. Look at the businesses in your area. Even if you do not have a major corporate headquarters in your area, many companies have funds set aside for local community support. Supermarkets, major retail chains and financial institutions are just a few of the possibilities.

Speaking of financial institutions, remember that many banks administer family foundations and trusts. Explore the requirements and areas of interests of these funding sources. A serious case can be made that entering a production into a statewide festival has not only artistic value, but educational and community value as well.

After you have won at the state level, all of the above opportunities are still available to you. In fact, because everybody loves a winner, you can anticipate greater fund raising success at this point. This is especially true if you effectively utilize the public relations opportunities that are available to you.

One final point! Most if not all, state organizations provide financial support to state festival winners on some level. In SETC, state awards range from \$200 to \$1,000 for a winning production. While this may not fully cover the trip to the SETC festival, it surely will help to some extent.

In summary, by being responsible in our choice of production, and by being creative, any organization has the financial wherewithal to showcase the talent that their organization and community treasure. Festival participation is educational for all and the rewards of recognition and prestige are priceless!

“Begging for Money” by Gregg L. Parker

Reprinted with permission from “*Building The Tower. Dynamic Director Creates Inspiring Vehicle for Students*” in Southern Theatre, Summer 2002. *The following is an example of how Bob Jones High School of Madison, AL raised funds to attend the Secondary School Theatre Festival at SETC Convention 2002.*

...one of the chief challenges facing the troupe in the weeks before the SETC Convention was how to get there. Mobile is located at the southern end of the state, more than 300 miles from Madison. Craft estimated the SETC trip would cost approximately \$17,000 for the 73 people, including cast, crew, auditionees and chaperones, traveling by bus to the convention.

“There aren’t enough car washes and candy bar sales to raise that kind of money,” says Craft.

So Craft came up with the idea of asking local businesses to contribute money for the trip, promising recognition in production programs and in less tangible ways, such as through the creation of a higher profile for the city.

“We go to the community and show them what the drama club is doing for the image of our city and state,” says Craft. “Students are given what we affectionately call a *beg letter*.”

The letter describes how Bob Jones won the state high school drama competition and therefore is advancing to the SETC competition, which is “a great honor for our school and community since it amounts to winning the state championship and then competing for a national title. Additionally, our students will also be allowed to audition for scholarships to be awarded by 15-20 major colleges and universities.” The letter notes that many students cannot afford the cost of traveling to the SETC Convention and asks for a tax-deductible donation to assist with expenses. Students took the letters personally to city businesses.

Madison businesses, especially smaller ones, eagerly became sponsors. The students raised the entire \$17,000 by the February deadline for registration.