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## **Digital Marketing for Dance: Strategies, Analysis, and Discussion**

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## **Introduction**

Just as social media has come to dominate all facets of culture in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, so has it become a necessary tool for arts organizations. Such organizations must prioritize their global outreach to grow and thrive. The purpose of this paper is to analyze how a local ballet company, Ballet Idaho, has come to terms with a digital marketing paradigm shift in a post-pandemic era. The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed the importance of connectivity with one's community for many organizations, none more than those that are responsible for arts. Ballet Idaho was one such organization affected drastically by the pandemic. It forced the company out of the theater for nearly two seasons, thus separating the community from its source for dance performances. This project aims to use the perceptions of company dancers and audience members about the digital marketing of Ballet Idaho in comparison with strategies from other dance companies to determine how our organization can best build long-lasting connections within the Boise community.

Using survey results from the dancers of Ballet Idaho and marketing research from other dance companies, I defined three key pillars of marketing for dance organizations. Those pillars are: (1) community support is vital to the health of dance organizations, (2) community support grows when there is consistent interaction between the organization and the community, and (3) frequent and personalized marketing is necessary to foster growth in community connections as well as give members of the organization confidence in its mission. After analyzing data from other dance companies and their marketing strategies, I then cross-reference Ballet Idaho's own tactics to determine where their marketing could be strengthened, especially as it pertains to the use of social media. This paper does not aim to disparage Ballet Idaho or its success as an organization. Instead, it uses scholarly thought surrounding marketing for arts organizations and

the subjective opinions of members of the Ballet to determine how this company can continue to thrive and flourish.

### **Audience Outreach and Inclusion**

A 2008 piece entitled *The Effect of Marketing on Dance Activity* details many of the factors an organization must consider when advertising to a specific community. The customer is centered in promotion when their needs, wants, perceptions, preferences, and satisfactions are collected and considered each season (Zaggelidou 2008). The same study offers the following plan for dance companies to follow:

1. Define the product (dance).
2. Define the market (audience).
3. Define the goals to be attained (number of tickets or subscriptions sold).
4. Develop the strategy (determine how the goals will be attained).
5. Develop a plan of evaluation (every marketing plan must be able to be evaluated).

When applying the above game plan to Ballet Idaho, we must account for the necessary inclusion of social media, especially in a post-pandemic world. Gretchen Fox, CEO of MTO Agency, collaborated with *Dance Magazine* to offer dance organizations tips on how to effectively market on digital platforms. She recognized that the pandemic caused unprecedented financial challenges for all arts organizations but went on to state that marketing is ultimately about building relationships with one's community (Wigenroth 2020). One way in which dance companies succeed in building these relationships is by making themselves something various community members and businesses can identify with. This tactic was used by the Elizabethan Theater Trust of Australia in 1954 (Radbourne 2000). This trust eventually established the Australian Ballet, one of the foremost companies in the world. The AB went on to advertise in

many of the ways that Ballet Idaho currently does: posters and flyers being sent via mail, outreach programs to schools, and grant support from local and national organizations. These similarities allow us to believe that Ballet Idaho has laid the groundwork for successful marketing. The question that remains is how we maintain relevancy in the Boise community and expand the audience base of the organization.

The Australian Ballet's success proved that flourishing as an artistic entity directly corresponds with being an organization community members can identify with. Even though Boise is a quickly growing city, it still hasn't matched the population size of cities that residents are relocating from, like Seattle, San Francisco, and Portland. Fortunately, community culture is often stronger in smaller cities than it is in larger ones, as shown by a finding from a study that focused on creativity and competition in traditionally rural areas of the UK (Huggins 2011). Idaho itself is home to many traditionally rural areas, like Star, Nampa, and Caldwell. Though we know that Ballet Idaho's presence is strong in Boise, there is untapped potential in these peripheral communities. By directing some of the marketing effort to these smaller cities, especially on digital platforms, the organization can continue to cultivate a diverse audience.

Regardless, defining a market is a particularly difficult task, especially as presence at performing arts events continues to decline on an international level. Research from the University of Florida regarding audiences of dance has determined that if dance organizations can understand consumption motives, they can design appropriate customer experiences to increase satisfaction and customer loyalty (Gagliano 2020). For example, we know that audience members attend *The Nutcracker* because it is family-friendly, has many performance options, and makes a great gift during the holiday season. How do we take those attributes and apply them to more abstract performances?

Manuel Cuadrado (2018) found that public interest in the arts is gendered and strongly associated with emotions. A study done in 2015 by the National Endowment for the Arts reported that across the classical performing arts most attendees are white, hold a college degree, have an annual income above 50,000 dollars per year, are female, and are over the age of 44. Gagliano (2020) noted that attendance of performing arts events is an opportunity for identity affirmation and expression. Visitors want to belong to a “specific social world, populated by like-minded people.” Looking at the 2015 NEA study, it appears that outreach to lower-income, non-white, and younger audiences is necessary. This information, combined with the need to appeal to Boise’s peripheral cities, solidifies the idea that Ballet Idaho must become an organization that a wider array of individuals can identify with.

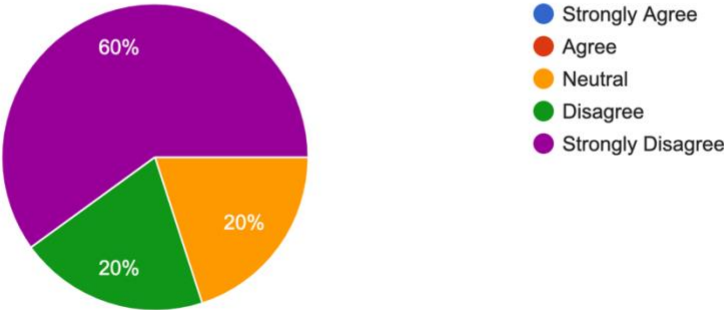
This is where the perspectives and social circles of Ballet Idaho’s employees, specifically the dancers, would be beneficial. The dancers of Ballet Idaho are all under 40, of varying socioeconomic stance, and are involved in numerous other organizations throughout the Treasure Valley. For example, most teach throughout Boise and its surrounding areas, and some are students at Boise State University. The opinions and suggestions of the dancers are rarely cited when Ballet Idaho’s marketing department is looking for ideas. In fact, it is more common that the dancers themselves reach out with ideas or suggestions for posts, takeovers, and features on the Ballet’s social media. It has been established that the key to expanding an audience lies in the ability to connect. By using these pre-existing connections, Ballet Idaho will better be able to reach communities that have been difficult to connect with, thus growing its consumer base.

### **The Mission Statement, Dancer Opinions, and Unique Marketing**

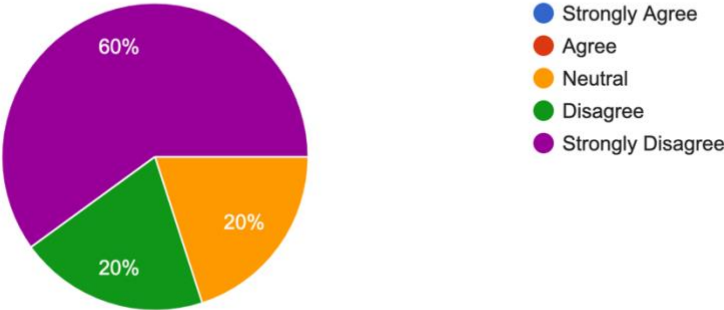
The thoughts, opinions, and suggestions of the dancers are of the utmost importance to the health of Ballet Idaho. After all, the dancers are the soul of the organization. Without the

dancers, there is no performance that an audience can attend. Research has been conducted on the dancers' perceptions of the Ballet's social media. This survey indicated that the dancers understood the importance of digital marketing and community interaction. A random sampling of dancers was chosen, and the following results were obtained:

Ballet Idaho's Instagram is utilized to the best of its abilities as a marketing platform.  
5 responses

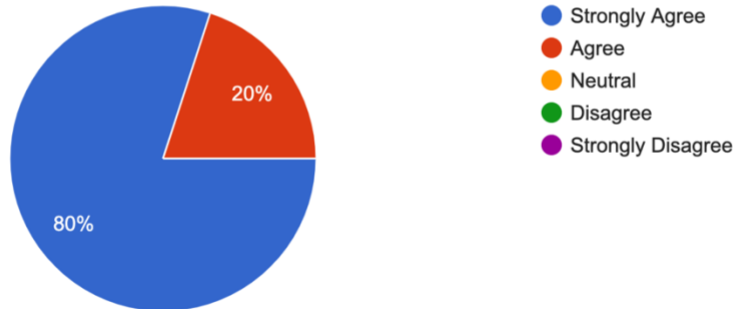


Ballet Idaho's Instagram is consistent (posts are regular and informative/engaging).  
5 responses



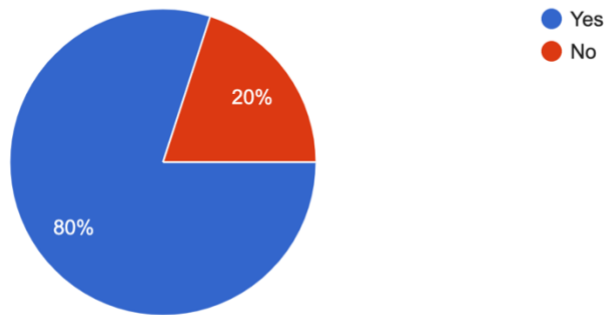
Ballet Idaho's Instagram is a necessary tool for informing the community about the organization and forging new connections.

5 responses



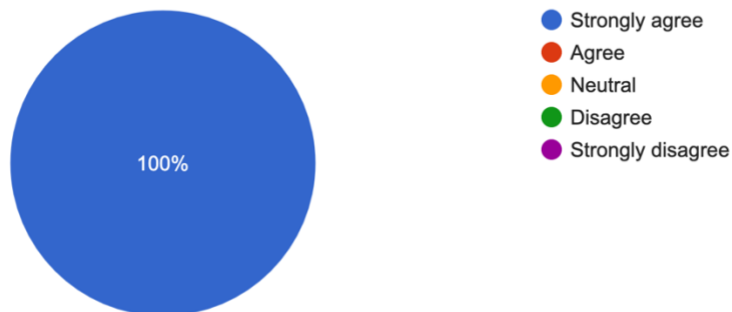
You have heard from other dancers/employees/supporters of the Ballet that there is a general demand for more consistency and content from the Ballet's social media.

5 responses



Arts organizations must have strong social media presences to maintain connections with their audience members, attract new supporters, and accurately represent their artists.

5 responses





Though all 21 company members were offered the survey, only five responded. When dancers have offered their opinions and suggestions for marketing in the past, they have been ignored. Such responses from administration indicate that there is a lack of openness to outside opinions and novel solutions. A remedy for this would be to survey the dancers annually about marketing for the organization. Similar polls are already conducted when analyzing the performance of the Ballet's artistic director, so it is logical that dancer opinions would be considered in other areas of the organization as well.

This poll, conducted anonymously, informs us that there are great strides to be taken in terms of improving the Ballet's digital platforms. Colbert (2003) stresses the difficulty of such endeavors by defining arts events on a continuum. High art is at one end while popular art is at the other. Colbert asserts that marketing high art, such as a dance performance, is unique because of its mission-oriented existence. Ballet Idaho's mission is to "engage with Idaho communities to create immersive dance performances and educational experiences that are accessible to all." Colbert's research indicates that while community connections are important, high art organizations must seek out consumers who are attracted to the product instead of marketing the product for a huge consumer base. This means Ballet Idaho must ask which individuals are attracted to their product while also making their product more accessible to a broader demographic.

One solution is the inclusion of other artists. Recently, local dance organization LED offered an "artist discount" for its October show *Silver City*. Taking measures to be inclusive of other dance organizations is important as well. For example, utilizing local choreographers and directors of other companies might bring in more Idaho residents. Though Ballet Idaho dancers

are eager to work with well-known choreographers, there is a lack of understanding in Idaho of the magnitude of such endeavors. While Idahoans might not know the names George Balanchine or Dani Rowe, they are more likely to recognize Lauren Edson (director of LED) and Lydia Sakolsky-Basquill (director of Project Flux), both of whom are originally from Boise. Furthermore, these dance organizations have their own boards, audiences, and dancers that would then have ample reason to attend a performance of the Ballet's.

What we can derive from Colbert's research about marketing for the high arts is that each performance must be marketed according to its place on the continuum between popular art and high art. For example, *The Nutcracker* is popular art. When analyzing the history of this ballet, experts feel as though its fame comes from the number of children involved. It usually represents the first introduction to both classical music and dance, with most productions having upwards of 35 children involved (Begley, 2014). When your child is performing in a show, you must go see it. Typically, extended family members are invited too. Begley points out that *The Nutcracker* often pays the bills for most professional ballet companies.

Clearly, one can see the appeal of *The Nutcracker* as a piece of popular art. Looking at some of the Ballet's other performances, the work becomes more abstract and begins to resemble high art. For example, Ballet Idaho is scheduled to perform George Balanchine's *Serenade* in February of 2022. Balanchine is famous for his numerous "plotless" pieces. *Serenade* is one of these works. Featuring a group of 17 women, five men, and three soloist women, the work is about 30 minutes long and lacks any distinct plot. Though those invested in neo-classical dance would leap at the opportunity to attend such a performance, it isn't necessarily appealing to the audience that would flock to *The Nutcracker*.

Once again, it is necessary to return to the perspectives of the dancers. When marketing plotless dance or even more contemporary work, the lynchpin of the work itself is the group of dancers performing. Their thoughts, feelings, and perceptions provide ample material to evoke interest in an audience. One of the foremost features of the New York City Ballet's YouTube channel is a series of videos called "Anatomy of a Dance." In these videos, a single dancer speaks over video of a role they are performing. There are two benefits of this, the first being that footage of performances allows potential audience members to see what product they would consume if they were to attend a performance. Second, dancers are included firsthand in the marketing process. Their personal thoughts surrounding a piece of work are shared with potential and current audience members, further connecting the community to individuals instead of to an abstract organization. If there is anything to be gleaned from the results of the above survey, it is that the dancers of Ballet Idaho have many ideas about the digital marketing of the organization and how important it is. A second part of the survey allowed the dancers to suggest posting habits for the Ballet, whereupon the following ideas came forth:

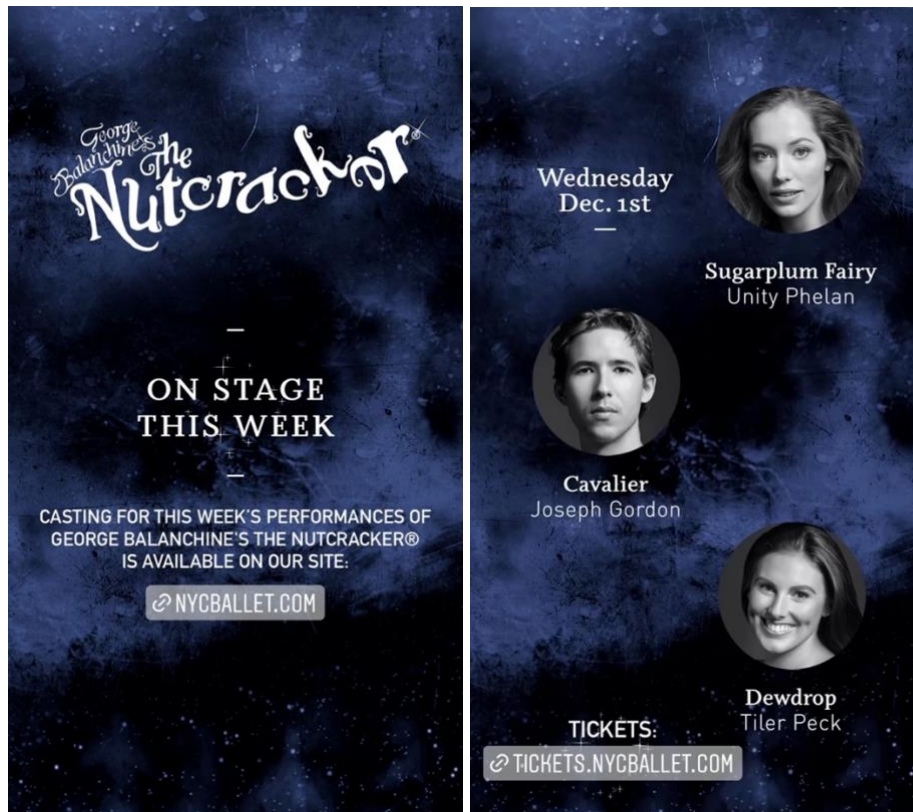
1. Utilization of the "reels" feature on Instagram, more dancer takeovers and live videos, and story posts that are shareable for the dancers.
2. A more consistent posting schedule with at least two posts per week.
3. Posts of behind-the-scenes work in the studio and leading up to performances to encourage excitement about ongoing work.

Fox (2012) studied the social media habits of the Pennsylvania Ballet and Oregon Ballet Theater from 2011 till 2012, noting what strategies the two companies utilized to create unique online presences and remain relevant in their communities. Her research focused on the importance of videos within an organization's social media. As dance is a visual artform, it is

necessary that an audience see it to appreciate it. Fox also notes the ability of livestreaming for dance performances, a technique used by many organizations prior to and throughout the pandemic. She notes that Misnomer Dance Theatre and the Metropolitan Opera, both based in New York City but with drastically different budgets, saw increases in ticket sales and interest after livestreaming performances. The information that Fox provides and the success of video projects like NYCB's "Anatomy of a Dance" solidify the necessity of unique marketing strategies. This also confirms that the dancer's suggestions are headed in the right direction. The dancers possess inherent knowledge about what type of digital marketing is important for the Ballet to maintain its relevance among the community and strengthen its pre-existing connections. Acting on the examples set by Misnomer Dance Theatre and NYCB could positively influence the Ballet's current and potential audiences.

### **The Importance of Frequent and Personalized Marketing**

Using the New York City Ballet as an example once more, a quick analysis of their Instagram informs the viewer that they are actively implementing each of these strategies as well as Zaggelidou's marketing principles and Colbert's art continuum. NYCB's most recent post as of November 29, 2021, was posted one day prior. It was three parts long and detailed the use of older children in their production of *The Nutcracker* as a precaution during the pandemic. The NYCB's Instagram story contained a series of posts, the first noting new merchandise available for purchase, the second announcing a new episode of the company's podcast, and the final posts announced casting for the week's upcoming Nutcracker performances.



The posts about children involved also inform the audience about precautions being taken against the spread of COVID-19. Story posts that specify which dancers will be performing and include links to tickets allow potential audience members to connect more personally with specific dancers as well as providing the dancers with something to post on their own social media.

The NYCB and Ballet Idaho have drastically different budgets due to the historical importance, geographic location, and global recognition of NYCB's prestige. As of 2016, the NYCB's budget is approximately 85 million dollars per year according to their senior director (Bird 2016). Ballet Idaho's yearly budget is about 2.2 million as of 2019 (Fisher 2019). It follows that we should compare the company's marketing strategies to other organizations with similar budgets. A 2017 study of Nashville Ballet, whose yearly budget is about six million as of

2018 (Vasterling 2018), allows us to better compare Ballet Idaho's marketing with fiscally similar dance companies.

This study found that the Nashville Ballet used similar tactics to NYCB via social media to promote the company's upcoming performances. The research included analysis of specific social media posts and concluded that images were the most popular type of post for Nashville Ballet, with the company posting about 2-3 times per week and increasing the number of posts on performance weekends (Lambert 2017). Ballet Idaho's own posting habits include the same tactics as these other companies, but the main difference is the consistency of such posts. Though the number of posts has increased significantly following the first week of Nutcracker performances, prior to this there were large lulls in posts. From August 5<sup>th</sup> till November 11<sup>th</sup>, the company only posted ten times, meaning the average post was less than once per week.

Cross-referencing of other professional ballet company's social media alongside dancer perspectives invites one to consider how Ballet Idaho begins to improve its own social media presence. A relatively small company, it is the only professional ballet company in the state of Idaho, thus monopolizing that market within the state. How does the organization make the most of this opportunity?

### **Conclusion**

The pandemic offered numerous challenges for dance companies. Ballet Idaho, like many other ballet companies, advertised a digital season to its usual season subscribers and others in the Boise community. However, the digital season was not as fiscally rewarding as a physical season typically would be. Despite financial hardships, the company has returned to a physical season for 2021 and 2022. The pandemic revealed a truth about the effects of digital marketing for dance organizations, especially those within small or growing communities.

The following ideas have been discussed: (1) inclusion of dancer ideas and preferences, (2) increased collaboration with other local arts organizations, (3) more consistent posting and more diverse posts, and (4) consideration of whether the performance being marketed is popular art or high art.

Ballet Idaho holds a distinct place within the arts community of Boise. Many of its dancers are members of other organizations, meaning they have increased community connections. The Ballet provides both high art and popular art each year, meaning it has a diverse range of performance options. Ballet Idaho is also primed for success in digital marketing; its strategies match those that the Australian Ballet used many decades ago to gain relevance and dominate the dance industry in their region. As it continues to build consistency and incorporate the ideas discussed above, its social media presence will strengthen, and its community ties will follow.

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