When Competing with High-Tech Distractions, Clever, Effective Publicity Is Crucial

By Kevin Clark
In today’s high-tech society, your campus audiences have access to surround sound home movie theaters, lightning fast computer systems and other technology that puts them instantly in touch with friends all around the world. And they can use all this technology from the comfort of their own rooms!

Why, then, would students come see the live comedian, musician, movie or speaker your activities board brings to campus? Perhaps the more important question is why should they come to live performances? Because doing so allows them to be part of a larger community by interacting with one another in a social environment. As programmers, it is our duty to draw them out and offer them a beneficial social setting. To do that, we must use new or unusual methods of promotion to get—and keep—their attention.

In fact, it is becoming evident that standard fliers, sidewalk chalks and other traditional publicity methods are no longer enough to get the audience to leave their high-tech comfort zones. New and innovative ways to publicize events on college campuses are the order of the day.

**Investing T.I.M.E.**

At Illinois Wesleyan University, we have found much success during the past few years by asking ourselves, “What is special about this event? What makes this movie or performer more enticing than going to an off-campus movie theater or staying in my room?”

We ask these questions at the time we conceive an event, throughout the planning stages and through the night of the show itself. These simple questions help us make sure we are providing the best possible experience for our audiences. After all, for audience members, participating in an event is all about the experience. For example, through programming tie-ins, we have transformed the showing of a movie into a complete entertainment experience.

Several years ago, we initiated a movie series offering films that were recently in commercial theaters. From the beginning, we asked, “How will our showings be different from going to the theater or watching in residence hall rooms?” The answer was T.I.M.E. We make sure to put some T.I.M.E. into every film we show.

T.I.M.E. stands for Totally Involved Movie Experience and is what makes a movie shown in our student center different than one shown in any other venue. For the movie *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, we mailed individual wedding invitations to all students, personally inviting them to the screening. As the audience arrived at the student center, they heard music from the movie sound track, saw white lights decorating walls and greenery, saw displays of wedding dresses donated by the theater department and tasted wedding cake that was served to everyone. Several days before the event, the white lights and wedding dresses went up in the venue and attracted quite a bit of attention. The wedding invitations and standard fliers further promoted the event. The night of the showing, the packed crowd not only saw a great movie, they experienced it with all their senses.

For the movie *Barbershop*, we again invested T.I.M.E. A month before the showing, we contacted a local hair salon to see if they would be interested in participating. The salon donated its services for three hours and we experienced a great partnership. The salon obtained exposure to college clientele and we had a successful event. The night of the movie, the audience arrived to see five barbershop chairs set up at the back of the venue. A waiting room stocked with plenty of magazines quickly filled up with students as they rushed to get their free haircuts. Before and during the movie, professional hairstylists cut men’s and women’s hair, providing a true barbershop experience.

For *Bend It Like Beckham*, we invested T.I.M.E. with the assistance of our athletic offices, specifically the men’s and women’s soccer teams. Both teams autographed soccer balls that were the give aways of the evening. Huge soccer nets were set up a week earlier in the student center to promote the event. Big signs for the film hung from the net crossbars. The night of the film, both soccer teams were given special reserved seating and we acknowledged their attendance before the movie began.

It is easier to invest T.I.M.E. with some films than it is others. The above examples are some of the easier movies with which to use this approach. But if your committee watches a film beforehand and brainstorm ideas, you are likely to be amazed by the tie-ins you can create—there is always something that can be added to a movie screening. One of our smaller tie-ins involved giving our ring pop candy in conjunction with a showing of *The Lord of the Rings*. It’s often the little things that make an event memorable and involving for an audience and turning a film screening into a Totally Involved Movie Experience doesn’t have to be expensive.

**Creating Street Teams**

There is probably nothing more effective in publicizing a show than word-of-mouth promotion. Traveling musicians have known for years that a legion of fans talking to each other about their music can accomplish more than any expensive marketing campaign. Programming boards can take advantage of this, too. At IWU, our Office of Student Activities created a Street Team to pro-

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**Students have unprecedented access to technology on today’s campuses. Take advantage of this fact by giving information to students on Web pages and through e-mails.**

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remote campus events. It is composed of student volunteers who receive instructions from the office via e-mail. Students who join typically have wanted to get involved on campus and learn more about campus programming. They can participate in any event they wish and there are no set requirements as to how many events they need to help with. Street Team members promote an event by announcing it in classes and at organizational meetings, distributing handbills around campus and volunteering the night of the event.

For their involvement, we provide Street Team members with special perks. In the case of live performers, we have been successful in getting performers to do a private meet and greet for the Street Team. On many occasions, musicians have also offered a private performance for the Team, which also gets first choice of any promotional giveaways that come through the office.

The Street Team concept has been very effective for our small programming board. It allows for larger numbers of people to get involved in events at varying levels. We have also discovered that the word-of-mouth promotion for and personal investment in events pays off in bigger audiences.

Offering a Programming Road Show

An informed audience is one that will fill the seats at every event. At IWU, we have worked with other campus departments to create a Programming Road Show. At the beginning of each semester, we organize all promotional materials for the upcoming semester's events. We compile videos, CDs, headshots and biographies for all the acts we've booked into an entertaining presentation outlining the entire semester of programming. We take Programming Road Shows to resident assistant trainings, fraternity and sorority chapter houses, and residence hall floors.

The benefits of doing Programming Road Shows are many, the most important being that students see promotional footage and hear audio clips that get them excited about later seeing the actual performances. They are then able to tell others what the shows are all about in their own words. They feel they have an inside track and get to preview performers before the rest of campus. At the conclusion of these presentations, we invite participants to reserve seats for large groups. This has been a very successful way for us to fill the seats and attract a lot of invested fans.

These days, to have successful campus events, it is imperative to do more than set the stage and expect people to show up.

Promoting All with Equal Intentions

There is a huge difference in the promotion of artists who are well known and those who are not. If Dave Matthews is coming to your campus, you probably will not need to do much more than tell a few of your friends and word will travel. However, if you are bringing in an up-and-coming artist who does not have the same marquee value, it is important to sell who the performer is and what they have done.

Many NACA artists have toured with nationally recognized groups or appeared on various television shows, and that is what you can promote. Yes, this means adding more words to your flyers or handbills, but it gives credibility to the artists, which they deserve, and which can help convince people on campus to check them out. Web sites and promotional e-mails make dissemination of this information easier than ever before.

Keep in mind that you might also bring in performers who are just starting out and your school could be hosting one of their first shows. This is when it is crucial to utilize a Street Team to get the word out and distribute promotional materials.

No matter whether you are bringing in a well-known or an up-and-coming act, it is necessary to promote them all with the intention of packing the house every time.

Leaving a Lasting Impression

These days, to have successful campus events, it is imperative to do more than set the stage and expect people to show up. The true challenge—and fun—lies in developing events that leave lasting impressions on your audiences so they'll come back for more. Take it upon yourself to think of new and innovative ways to entertain, educate and captivate audiences. With careful planning and attention to detail, you can create an atmosphere where audiences will pack the house no matter how well known the performer is—and have a good time while attending.

About the Author

Kevin Clark is assistant dean of students at Illinois Wesleyan University. Previously, he served the school as residence hall director and director of Student Activities. He holds a bachelor's degree in communication from the University of South Florida and a master's degree in college student personnel administration from Illinois State University. In NACA, he served as the showcase operations coordinator for NACA Mid America in 2003 and 2004. He is a member of the Association of College Unions International and the American College Personnel Association.