

## Strategy Guide: How Is My Museum Like a Movie Theater? (Or Vice Versa)

For two and a half years, I was the Managing Director of the Grand Cinema, a non-profit art-house movie theater in Tacoma, WA.

It was the result of some freak cosmic alignment that I was able to get hired. I had good non-profit experience, knowledge of the theater, event planning and marketing experience, a real love of the mission ... but I was just 23. The Board didn't realize how old I was until they read it in the paper after I was hired. They knew I was young, but *that* young? I think that caught them a little off-guard, now that they were entrusting me with a \$700,000 annual budget.

I felt confident I could do the job, and I knew a lot going in. But I also knew, perhaps most importantly, that there was a lot I didn't know. I was young and excited and I had a million ideas—but which were viable? Which were going to turn into unforeseen money pits? Which could I present to the Board and say, "This program has been very successful in other theaters," with documentation to back me up?

The problem I faced running a non-profit, three-screen, art-house movie theater became pretty apparent: I had few parallels to help inform decisions. Had I been the director of an orchestra, a shelter, or a small historical museum, there might be hundreds of organizations across the country similar to mine. Not so at the Grand.

So I improvised. I decided to look for help and expertise elsewhere. I asked myself, how is my movie theater like an art museum? What I can learn from them? Or how is the Grand like a local community theater? How are we similar, how are we different?

I found this exercise to be invaluable as I weighed decisions.

By comparing the Grand to an art museum, I saw that the relationship they had to traveling exhibits was not unlike the Grand's dependence on Fox Searchlight, Miramax, and other independent film studios. Once I'd realized that, my first goal was to reduce that dependence as much as I could—after all, if the movies coming out of Hollywood were bad one year, our theater was going to take a hit. We decided to start developing our own filmmakers. We offered them a chance to compete with a three-day film competition, helped them get better through filmmaking workshops, and then offered any local filmmakers the chance to premiere their movie for free at the Grand (we sold them a lot of popcorn on those nights).

By comparing the Grand to a symphony, I realized that we both faced the same competition: home entertainment systems that allowed patrons to watch movies or listen to CDs at home. So I started looking for more compelling reasons to get people out to the theater, like providing a live score to a silent film and having weekly film discussion groups with every new movie.

Importantly, this exercise also helped me realize that even though the Grand was superficially similar to a community theater operation, our business models, our products, and our basic operations were radically different. Understand the business models of other organizations

helped me ensure that I wouldn't draw the wrong lessons and embark on a project that was ill-suited to us—no matter how well it did for another organization.

I don't mean to suggest that these comparisons were quick and easy to make or that the answers I took away are as simple as I portray here. Looking at how organizations outside your field handle those threats will help you see opportunities and solutions you might have missed before.