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WHAT WE'RE LEARNING: TRANSFORMING ONE'S MARKETING APPROACH

THE QUICK TAKE

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| RECIPIENTS | LUCKY PLUSH PRODUCTIONS, www.luckyplush.com |
| CHALLENGE | Create buzz about a dance company |
| SOLUTION | Design new media to illustrate artistic vision, exploit word-of-mouth |
| RESULTS | Increased ticket sales by 10 percent; expanded audiences via the Internet; and built a following of over 10,000 people on its Twitter page |
| IMPACT | Forever transformed the nonprofit's approach to |
| AWF SUPPORT | Two grants totaling \$19,000 |

THE PROJECT

Choreographer Julia Rhoads first imagined a flipbook for Lucky Plush Productions in 2006. Created from stills of performances, it would portray several seconds of movement when flipped. Like Lucky Plush's performances, it would blend dance, visuals, and new media to express a new and different synthesis. Rhoads applied to the Arts Work Fund for a grant to produce the flipbook. When the request was turned down, she was "astonished." Today Rhoads sees the turndown as seminal; she reports that ensuing conversations with AWF staff took the good idea and made it better by making it strategic. Intrigued by the proposal, AWF encouraged Lucky Plush to specify how the flipbook would be used and what the organization expected to accomplish. In 2007, AWF awarded a grant of \$9,500 to Lucky Plush to develop a marketing plan. Around the same time, Lucky Plush was offered a chance to showcase its work at Chicago's Museum of Contemporary Art. Envisioned now as a plan for audience development, the flipbook became a means to an end, a way of reaching audiences familiar with the MCA but not with Lucky Plush. The resulting flipbook included a discount coupon for the MCA performances, which allowed Lucky Plush to track response. Copies were mailed to lapsed donors; placed in coffeehouses, music clubs, theatre lobbies, and local gyms; and distributed by "street teams" to patrons of non-dance shows. According to Rhoads, the flipbooks "got more butts in seats."

Lucky Plush decided it could benefit from outside professional help to reflect on what it had learned from the experience and how to leverage its appeal. A second AWF grant of \$10,000 for this purpose was awarded in 2008. The grant allowed Lucky Plush to experiment further, fundamentally transforming how it approaches marketing and audience development today. As a result, Lucky Plush has become recognized for its innovative and socially relevant marketing materials. Through the grant, Lucky Plush linked branding and marketing to its 10th anniversary concept related to intellectual property and dance. It launched a project website www.StealThisDance.com, branded rehearsal clothing and costumes for the anniversary performances with the Lucky Plush logo, and created an anniversary flipbook which was distributed throughout the Chicago-area.

THE TAKEAWAYS

The flipbook project evolved as unexpected obstacles or new opportunities appeared. Rhoads values "the way AWF supported changes to how funds were allocated based on an informed and shifting understanding of [Lucky Plush's] needs." She says many arts groups may be reluctant to talk with funders about changing course for fear that they will be viewed as "not accountable and potentially not suitable to receive grants in the future," but encourages them to overcome any reluctance. She's convinced that the exchange of ideas produces not only better results for arts groups, but also greater returns on funder investment. For Lucky Plush, it also stimulated a fundamental shift in the nonprofit's approach to marketing and audience development. Today "every person affiliated with the organization [has] ownership of exporting [the company's] visual identity," says Rhoads, and "every promotion is an extension of the company's dance work, maintaining an artistic integrity of its own." The project also influenced Rhoads' thinking about how to work effectively with consultants and other vendors; the importance of finding consultants willing to co-create rather than impose a formula; and the difficulty of ensuring that the skills, knowledge, and relationships introduced by consultants are transferred and lead to sustainable gains. Second-generation flipbooks have led to branded merchandise including mash-up and recycled clothing; and digitized formats and blogs have led to StealThisDance.com, the company's 10th anniversary celebration of sampling and appropriation in dance.