



An Opera Boutique

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Getting Started

This is the first in a series of articles that will address all of the issues related to volunteers operating a performing arts boutique in your theater. There are basic principles in retailing that must be applied regardless of the size of your theater, the length of your season, or the available space for a retail operation. Applying these basic principles will allow you to maximize your effort, provide a more rewarding experience for your volunteers, and increase customer patronage.

Write a Business Plan.

Before ordering any inventory and before acquiring any fixtures and equipment, you must write a business plan. You will not know how much inventory to purchase until you formulate the amount of sales volume you can reasonably expect to generate. The following assumptions are for a relatively new operation that is still gathering momentum, operating in a modest space and located where all who come into the theater will see it.

Revenue Projections

Assume 2% -5% of the audience will make a purchase (this number will increase over time).

Assume the average purchase will be \$20 - \$40 (the average purchase will increase as you expand your product mix over time).

Inventory Projections

Purchase enough inventory to equal 150% of your anticipated gross sales during a performance, a repertory, or a performance season depending on your company's production schedule.

Product Mix

Remember that you are a 501(c)(3), not-for-profit organization and limited to the kinds of merchandise you are allowed to sell for a profit. Your inventory must be related to your mission.

Choose a merchandising committee of four to six people who can be very objective, have a good sense of color and design, and can identify with your target audience. Your committee will determine the kinds of signature items to be sold, the color and design of the items and the appropriate price range for your public. If you plan to use the official logo of your opera company, be sure to get their approval for the logo application on boutique merchandise. They will probably want to see a prototype.

Establish color stories in your inventory mix. Presentation is as important as the kinds of items you sell, and color groupings have great visual impact.

A performing arts boutique is perceived to be like a museum store in that the merchandise should be of high quality, unique, and reasonably priced. At the major gift markets, there is a section of vendors called “museum source.” These vendors specialize in developing customized merchandise at a reasonable price. There are other sources for custom product that will be discussed in a future publication.

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Organization

A clear strategy and well defined responsibilities will help make the operation of a retail venture, which impacts both the volunteer group and the opera company, more efficient and free from conflict and misunderstanding.

Service Level Agreement

Every opera boutique is unique as to who makes the purchasing decisions, owns the inventory, makes the payment of invoices, sets the hours of operation, and determines the use of funds. After years of struggling with misunderstandings of responsibilities between the company and the guild boutique, we finally instituted a Service Level Agreement (SLA), which brought much relief and a spirit of greater cooperation to both parties.

A Service Level Agreement not only defines responsibilities and expectations but also facilitates a smoother transition when personnel changes occur on the opera staff or in the volunteer organization. It becomes part of your operations manual. Our SLA contains seven sections:

- **Introduction:** Purpose of the agreement, parties to the agreement, and spirit of cooperation.
- **Scope of the Agreement:** Duration of the agreement, amendments, and hours of operation.
- **Specific Responsibilities of the Guild:** Duties of the buyer, merchandiser, managers, scheduler, customer assistants, custom order processor, and treasurer.
- **Specific Responsibilities for the Opera Company:** Processing invoices, cash operations, and reports.
- **Performance Measurement and Reporting:** Key performance indicators and performance reporting.
- **Operating Responsibilities:** Obligations of the guild and obligations of the opera company.
- **Approvals:** Signatures of staff and volunteers involved in the project for various levels of decision-making.

Operations Manual

It is equally important to have all of the information related to the operation of your boutique or opera shop recorded in an Operations Manual. Every member of the retail committee should have a copy of the manual. Depending on the size and scope of your shop, here is a list of the items that should be included in your manual:

- **Service Level agreement** (see above)
- **Welcome letter to volunteers:** Includes instructions for parking, access to the theater, season schedule, time commitment, hours of operation, set up and take down, and volunteer incentives.
- **Description of Boutique Positions:** Managers, schedulers, E-boutique and custom order processors, customer assistants, and inventory manager.
- **Layout of the set-up and placement in the storage closet:** Graphic drawing of the fixtures as they should be set up for selling and placed in the storage room.
- **Forms:** Copies of forms to balance the cash register banks, E-boutique fulfillment log, volunteer schedule grid, form used to transfer goods to opera staff for development purposes, sales tax exemption certificate, boutique gift certificate, and sample letter included in mail orders.
- **Inventory List:** A detailed inventory list describing items, quantity, cost, retail price, and previous two years ending inventory.
- **Boutique Volunteer Contact List:** Names, addresses, phone numbers, and e-mail addresses.
- **Volunteer Staff Assignments:** Names of the current individuals with managerial or leadership assignments for the boutique and their individual responsibilities.
- **Security Procedures:** Required procedures for staff and volunteers to protect your investment.
- **Computer Disc:** The manual includes a computer disc with all of the information and forms contained in the manual so any item can be updated, revised and printed as needed.

With this kind of organization in place, you will avoid and hopefully eliminate overlap, confusion, and conflict. It will be very easy to transition the duties to new personnel, as all they need to know is in one manual. It is vitally important that each person involved with a project understand what is expected of him or her and the amount of latitude they have in making decisions. Equally important is the need to have regular meetings and discussions about the status of the boutique project. No one person involved should be making any major decisions independently.

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Appealing to the Senses

The success of retailing will be dependant on the ambiance you create in your selling space. It is important to keep all five senses in mind when laying out your store.

Visual

Visually, can your boutique location be seen above the heads of a crowded foyer or lobby? Mark your location with

- [1] A well-lit back drop that displays a professionally produced sign and
- [2] merchandise which has been creatively arranged on a backdrop or grid.

Avoid a cluttered appearance. Focus on arranging your displays in color groups. Make use of clip-on lights and lights that have been built into your fixtures. Lobbies tend to be dimly lit, which makes it difficult to see the color and details of the merchandise. Use creative merchandising displays to make your merchandise look exciting and vibrant. Take the opportunity to regularly visit museum stores and high-end retail stores to get ideas for your own displays. Always keep things looking fresh. Rotate the location of your merchandise categories when possible to make things look new and different. Be sure you have a clear understanding of the image you want to project before you begin to arrange or adjust the design, display, and merchandising of your shop. I have mentioned it before and will emphasize it again: “Presentation is Everything!”

Emotional

Playing to the emotions is important in motivating your public to make a purchase. We maintain a significant collection of children’s opera books, CDs, DVDs, and developmental music toys, as well as shirts, caps, and totes for the younger crowd. Everyone who comes into the theater is a parent, grandparent, aunt, God-parent, or guardian. Those of us in that category know that our heart rules when presented with an opportunity to buy a unique gift for these special children in our lives.

If your productions play near or through Christmas, Valentines Day, Mothers Day, and Fathers Day, remind your customers that great gifts can be purchased at your opera shop. We place small computer-generated tent signs in our displays which read, “Remember your Valentine with a gift from the Opera Boutique,” “Remember Mothers Day with a gift from the Opera Boutique,” and “Give a Christmas gift from the Opera Boutique.” Many times I have had love-smitten couples standing at our jewelry counter buying each other a Valentine gift and sealing the transaction with a kiss.

Audio

Put your public in the mood with the sounds of opera. The excitement of opera can be emphasized by playing a CD or DVD of the opera being performed each evening. We have a specially built fixture, which holds a DVD television and drawers below with CD and DVD stock. We always have a DVD of the opera playing in the machine. It is responsible for stimulating many purchases of opera recordings.

Finally, where appropriate, allow your customers to touch and experience the merchandise. It helps them to identify with the need for it to belong to them.

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Fine-Tuning Your Opera Boutique

Well-trained Volunteers

Your boutique volunteers need to be knowledgeable about the items you are selling, the processing of a transaction, and the dynamics of the theater.

Each year as you prepare to begin your season, require all boutique volunteers to attend a training meeting at the theater. Offer the training at least twice so they can come when it works best with their schedule. Review the operation of the cash registers and credit card machines. Discuss the merchandise that will be sold, new procedures, and anything they should know about the boutique set-up.

One of the most important points to emphasize is that your volunteers are an extension of the paid opera staff in the minds of those attending a performance. It is critical that volunteers understand that they cannot express any personal opinion about the productions on the stage or anything related to the performers or musicians, opera company personnel, etc. Volunteers are good will ambassadors and need to allow the audience to form their own opinion about the program.

It is important that the processing of a sale at the point of purchase be a smooth, efficient, and pleasant experience for the customer. The customer will be more likely to return often if they have confidence in the service, the knowledge of the sales staff, and knowing that they can make the purchase quickly. If there are slow-moving lines at the checkout area, it will be discouraging to those who are anxious to get to their seat. In Houston, we were missing sales due to long lines at the checkout areas, even though we have four cash registers and five electronic credit card machines. We chose to buy all new, faster equipment to accommodate everyone who wanted to make a purchase.

Your sales personnel should wear badges that identify them as a Guild volunteer. On the back side of the badge, print a step by step description for the operation of the cash register and credit card machine in case they need to review the procedure.

The ticket-buying public expects those acting in any official capacity in the theater to be able to direct them to their seat location, rest rooms, food and beverage services, telephones, electronic banking machine, lost and found, opera glass rentals, access to libretti (hopefully you are selling these in your shop), security, medical assistance, etc. Your boutique staff needs to know the answers to some or all of these questions and where to direct the patron for the help or information they need. It is important to remain calm and pleasant while helping a patron meet their needs.

Merchandising and Displays

In retailing, presentation is everything. Whether you are selling from skirted and draped tables or

regular retail fixtures, it is important to create maximum visual appeal. An impactful display will draw attention and create sales where there was no previous intention to make a purchase.

Group your merchandise by color. Even though all the CDs, DVDs, and books are together by category on several fixtures, also place them with your gift merchandise when the colors on the packaging or book covers match or coordinate. Display your jewelry in color groups, and coordinate evening bags and scarves by color.

If you are selling from tables, create a pyramid affect. Start in the middle and elevate the largest and most visually impactful items on draped risers. Continue by placing the next largest items in front of or next to the center. Create a pyramid effect by building to the sides and front of the centerpiece. Drape descending sizes of boxes as risers. Make both sides of the center a mirror image so more people can get in front of all the items being offered.

Use easels to display books, CDs, DVDs and other items that need to be placed upright. Avoid laying any items flat on the table. Create a slope to the sides and to the front. Do not place anything taller in front of something shorter. While it is always difficult to describe a picture, visualize such a display and its impact on you as a buyer. Spend time observing the professional displays in high-end retail stores. Also, at the gift shows in New York and other cities, take advantage of the many workshops, which include display techniques, merchandise and style trends, etc.

Finally, place your price stickers on the back or the bottom of the item, never on the front. Be sure to turn the price tags on jewelry face down.

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Attending Tradeshows

It is important that your shop look new and fresh at the beginning of each season. You may want to offer one or two outstanding items that connect with the theme of your season productions. It is usually possible to find beautiful silk scarves with designs that relate to opera themes in some way; men's fine silk neckties with relative patterns; evening bags and stoles and shawls galore; and wonderful evening jewelry. There are many tradeshows around the country with vendors offering a wide variety of items and prices and quality. Remember, your shop is considered to be like a museum shop where people expect to find unique, high quality items that are not overpriced. For this reason, I do not shop the wholesale markets closest to my city. I travel further than most of the owners of boutiques in my city so I can have an inventory that looks different from the selection in other stores here. If you are going to a market where you are not registered, call the tradeshow "buyers" office and ask what type of identification and credentials you will need to provide to be admitted. Pre-register if it is available; this will save time when you arrive at the tradeshow.

Attending tradeshows can be challenging. There are a few disciplines that need to be observed to make it a successful experience without spending too much time and money. It can be an overwhelming experience, and it is very easy to get sidetracked because there are so many wonderful things to see that have nothing to do with your mission. Before I attend a market, I make notes in a purse-size notebook about the items I have in stock, the productions in the upcoming season, and any obvious themes that relate to these operas. I make notes about the items that I may need to reorder and new items I want to find. I list the vendors I want to revisit. I take plenty of business cards with all of my contact information. Vendors will keep you informed of new items and shows where they will be exhibiting even if you have not yet placed an order with them. I leave on the earliest flight in the morning so I can have at least a half-day to attend the tradeshow on my first day in the city of my destination. When I arrive at the tradeshow, I use the tradeshow directory book I receive to find the booth numbers of all the vendors I have on my list. I put them in numerical order so I do not have to do any avoidable backtracking. I take at least two pair of very comfortable shoes and a tote bag instead of a purse, in which to carry my notebook, bottled water, snack bars and all of the catalogues and information I will be collecting. The lights in all of the booths are hot and draw so much moisture out of your body; making you feel very tired. It is very important to drink plenty of water to help compensate for the environment.

First, I visit the vendors I listed in numerical order. As I walk the aisles to their booths, I look for vendors that may have merchandise that relates to the new items I am trying to find. I make notes and return after I have first visited the vendors on my original list. If you don't do this, you may not get to the booths you intended to visit before the show ends or it is time to go home. If you are attending a tradeshow you have not been to before, there is usually an orientation workshop for new buyers, which lasts about one hour. This will help you make the most effective use of your time. They will explain the exhibitor categories and layout, refreshment areas, location of special services, etc.

Take lots of notes and collect catalogues and information that may be helpful in the future. It is very difficult to remember everything after you return home. If you see items you think may prove interesting but you are unsure or are not ready to order, write an order and take all copies with you. If you decide later you want to place the order, you can fax or mail it to the vendor. Call first to find out if it is in stock and can be shipped for the date you need to receive it. I have made use of information and catalogues I have had on file for several years, as I knew these sources would eventually be important. There are certain standard works that every opera company performs in rotation with new or less familiar works. If you see items that relate to standard works, take notes.

Every vendor has a minimum order requirement. It may be a minimum dollar requirement, a minimum number of pieces, or a combination of both. As small, seasonal specialty shops that are not open everyday, we have an especially challenging experience in finding what we need in manageable quantities. Most often there is only one item in a vendor's line that we need, and it becomes impossible to meet the minimums required to place an order. In these situations, I explain that I am buying for a not-for-profit company and that I am working as a volunteer at my own expense. I ask if I can pay an up-charge fee (usually \$10) to waive the minimum order requirement so I can get the items I want. Most of the time this works. The minimum order requirement is necessary to cover the vendor's cost of handling and shipping the order.

Many vendors have the ability to customize their items with your logo or create a special item for your company. There may be higher minimum requirements for this type of product development. Be sure to explore these options as these kinds of opportunities will allow you to offer something unique with your company imprint.

After each day at a tradeshow (when you have returned to your hotel room and put your feet up), go through your orders, and add up the total dollar amount of your orders. This exercise will help you see where there may be category deficiencies or excess. As you receive your orders, watch for items that were not shipped and were placed on back order. Be sure to cancel backordered items if they cannot be shipped for the time you need them. If you forget to do this, you may receive the backordered items several months later when you no longer need them. Tell the vendor the dates you want the order to be shipped and give them a cancellation date.

Happy Selling!

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Managing Volunteers

Volunteers are unpaid and act without the accountability of paid staff. Their actions can have a positive or negative impact on the integrity of the organization they serve. I have spent more than ten years managing volunteers in several organizations and studying industry reports on managing volunteers, their needs, and behavior. One of the most important points to emphasize is that your volunteers are an extension of the paid opera staff in the minds of those attending a performance or any event or program where opera volunteers are assigned. It is critical that volunteers understand that they cannot express any personal opinion about the productions on the stage or anything related to the performers or musicians, opera company personnel, etc. Volunteers are good will ambassadors and need to allow the audience to form their own opinion about the program.

It is important to be aware of the following items relative to managing volunteers so they [1] serve the best interest of the organization they represent and [2] experience the personal satisfaction that is important in exchange for the service they render. At times it will become necessary to dismiss volunteers from working with the organization or redirect their efforts without affecting the reputation of the organization or the volunteer.

Concern #1: Volunteers often do not understand their role as an extension of paid staff. This lack of understanding can lead to sharing personal opinions and criticism to the detriment of those being served.

Solution: Sensitivity training; implementation of a volunteer agreement; hold interviews with volunteers to discuss their performance and personal feelings about their efforts.

Concern #2: Volunteers may stay in their role even when they do not have the time or ability to carry out the assignment.

Solution: Volunteer training should emphasize that it is O.K. to opt out if the work becomes more of a challenge than they expected or if it requires more time than they are able to give to the program.

Concern #3: Volunteers need to network with each other to share their experiences and ideas that will help them in their work.

Solution: Volunteer networking meetings or socials for the purpose of sharing ideas and success stories will benefit their efforts and increase their resources and ability to perform their work.

Concern #4: Volunteers need to know that their efforts are valued and appreciated.

Solution: Send messages of appreciation regularly and hold volunteer appreciation gatherings.

Concern #5: Groups or organizations who receive programs from a volunteer docent need to have a process for expressing their appreciation or dissatisfaction with the efforts of the particular volunteer who is assigned to them.

Solution: Groups and organizations who receive programs from an opera docent should be

encouraged to return an evaluation to the opera guild or league.

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About the Author

Patte Comstock has helped define the standard for volunteer-run opera boutiques, not only as Boutique Vice-president of the Houston Grand Opera Guild, but as a generous teacher and consultant to other opera support groups. Having grown up in a retailing family, she studied retailing in college and owned a sportswear shop even before her graduation. Helping establish and, later, expand HGO's boutique was a natural step. Under her guidance and that of her co-chair, Penny Parish, and their many volunteers, the guild-run boutique has enabled the HGO Guild to fund educational and outreach projects and become an integral part of the opera-going experience in Houston.

Patte Comstock has been honored by Houston Grand Opera Guild as Volunteer of the Year and is a recipient of Opera Volunteers International's Partners in Excellence award. She is a past president of the HGO Guild.

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Opera Volunteers International is a not-for-profit organization dedicated to encouraging and supporting opera support groups and individual volunteers. For more information, see our web site at www.operavolunteers.org.