

How Does Hong Kong Dance Company across East and West to Move Hearts?

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Abstract

With rapid growth in creative industry, new media and contemporary art, traditional art forms like dance, opera, and music are facing a threat in raising their awareness among the audiences. Hong Kong, acting as Asia's world city with internationalized cultural enrichment and strengthening its traditions' heritage, has been encouraging its performing art industries to develop and rejuvenate from the dead of a cultural desert. However, the unpredictably changing audience behavior, rapid transformation of lifestyle, and the aging population issue worldwide have added pressure on industry enlargement. Thus, the undoubted pressure on increasing operational costs and shortages in up-to-standard new local performing art professions are core challenges that performing arts organizations face. With this concern, the writer analyzes Hong Kong Dance Company (HKDC)'s organizational management and strategic development and uses this as example to elaborate their successful rebirth. Different aspects of art administration bring significant impact on the success of a performing art organization, which can be often evaluated by its management factors, operation strategies, and development execution. HKDC re-established their branding with strategic planning and successfully earned their reputation and confidence from the audiences; along with the comprehensive audience development strategy and customized marketing segmentation focus, HKDC has strengthened their relationship with audiences and risen from the competitive art marketing in Hong Kong. Aiming for further expansion, the implementation on IMC approach, sustainability of funding, and long term audiences' build up are anticipated.

Keywords

Performing art administration, audience development strategy, marketing strategy, Hong Kong Dance Company, programming strategy

Introduction

A simple step with various rhythms and breaths as a steady position of Graham balance with stillness; dance is the artistic voice without words. Different than other art forms, dance often is labelled as the most challenging in expanding new audiences and balancing financial pressures. In the recent decade, the dance industry around the world, along with numerous other performing arts organizations, is facing challenge in survival of the market (Scheff, 3-18). Positioning itself as Asia's world city with internationalized cultural enrichment and strengthening traditions heritage, Hong Kong has been pushing its cultural industry development to rise from the dead of a cultural desert. The aging population, the changing audience behavior and lifestyle, the unpredictable shifting leisure-spending pattern and preference, and the increasing pressure on performing arts operational costs are all challenges that performing arts organizations face. With rising concern in the significance of art administration, the success of a performing art organization can be evaluated by its management factors, which should ultimately fulfill its mission-oriented objectives and reach success in profit generation. Others argue its effectiveness and persistent feasibility, particularly in Asia countries like Hong Kong where it's strongly influenced by westernization and indifference in cultural identity. Hong Kong Dance Company (HKDC) is an example which many claim that their successful reborn is attributed to its management on enlivened branding, customized marketing and audience development strategies.

Dance Development

"Dance with passion; dance to move hearts" is the objective of Yang Yuntao, the current artistic director of HKDC. His mission seems pure to art and is touching, but more difficult to execute than meets the eye. The art form's variety powerfully impacts on how audiences are built and what reaction the market may be sensitive to. Undoubtedly, dance is one of the most challenging art forms to build new audiences due to its complexity of aesthetic. Cohesion is difficult to embrace. The challenge to

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permeate the persevered traditional art value and modernized contemporary art element is demanding in many art forms, particularly for those with “old-fashioned” image likes Chinese dance. Scholastic and art professions criticized the over-eager merging modernization of the art creation which resulted in losing oriental aesthetics and its historical value; how to reach the balance and avoid superficial but un-connnotative performance is important. Although there is a 2% decrease in dance programs and attendance, the total box office income, outreach and education activities, Children’s troupe membership and activities fees of HKDC are increased significantly in 2013. However, the real indication of audience build-up behind those figures is worth an in-depth study. The acceptance of art forms with transformed elements and overall atmosphere are core considerations to artistic directors and managers. These factors consequently vary how an organization sets its goal on fulfilling its mission, build its brand, and launches its marketing and audience development strategies.

Branding

Branding establishment, as in how a human starts up a relationship with pleasant first-impression, values the perception build-up through thorough association and exploration, and eventually strengthens the relationship with trust, satisfaction and a sense of connection. Brand was relatively less valued among the Asian countries in the 80s when professions believed that audience development had no significant impact on a company’s sustainability. Paul Temporal claimed that branding is essential due to its strategic competitive advantage provided in a world characterized level of balance; social change, historical influence and technological impacts all are factors of branding management (Temporal, 47-59). Brand acts as part of a business’s mission, often interestingly reflecting the city’s development and changes of social, cultural, technical and even political aspects. Under the colonial eras, the British government was claimed to have a Laissez-faire policy to discourage art and cultural development, as the HK majority of local population was working class with limited disposable income and rarely had leisure time for entertainment. Thus, Hong Kong nowadays has changed rapidly and was raised as the “oriental dragon” with a shining image globally. The volatility of economies, the relentless improvement in technologies, and the rising market fragmentation and audiences’ unpredictable behaviors lead companies to rethink the possible damage from failing in branding strategy. In the case of HKDC, the management believes that reinforcing their brand to fit its mission for audiences is their future direction for success.

Aiming to rebuild and strengthen its modernized positive image in the recent decade, HKDC has emphasized its mission to impress the world with Chinese traditional Chinese dance of Hong Kong characters. An over-dependable branding strategy may lead to over-simplification of art production and transcend the attributes of the product (art and performance). HKDC’s executive director David Tsui admitted that the semi-reform of its mission was tough during previous years but they believe that HKDC’s branding strategy catches the balance between equitable freedom for innovative creation and moderate reputation build-up for the organization. Strengthening a company’s image among audiences, building up strong trust and eventually forming a relationship with them can successfully build up reputation.

“I am particularly fond of pursuing art which both advocates the traditional Chinese elements and the well versed in the western abstract spiritual beauty, such as Mr. Wu Guan-zhong’s painting,” famous choreographer and ex-artistic director of HKDL, Mr. Leung Kwok-Shing, shared. With the ambitious idealistic passion of being the cultural successor, artistic professions including HKDC leaders are facing the task of maximizing the oriental nationalist sentiment enhancement and historical wisdom development. The success of Pina Baosh and Cloud Gate in Asia has proven the possibility of dance reformation, whereas some pointed out it also depends on the crucial factors including good timing, positive external conditions and favorable management. Nevertheless, both organizations’ branding is clearly stated and everything they do sustains their identity. Comparatively, HKDC is slightly inferior when taking into account that the external conditions in Hong Kong are also relatively discouraged. Yang Yun Tao indicated that HKDC aims to build up a refreshing image of breaking its “old-frame.” Its strong image of promoting traditional Chinese dance art was deeply engraved in audience’s minds during the 1990s. Audience’s purchase preferences depend heavily on their perspectives.

It requires not only brand establishment, but also executing good brand management in helping with audience building and sustainability. Not only establishing the image and strengthening the reputation, both hardware and software elements at the organization act as an affirmation of its brand identity (Olins, 89). Under the case of HKDC, hardware includes each individual in the executive management

and artistic team, as well as the facility, dance sense setting, and artist's presentation; whereas software such as strategic audience development, integrated marketing communications and customer service are mutually reciprocal in branding reinforcement. The art productions and artists themselves already represent the organization. Junior and senior level managements and artists shared in the interview that their satisfaction from meaningful art creation and passionate extraordinary productions often overcame their uncompetitive employment benefits and its unfavorable bureaucratic system. Many brought up the rumors among artists lacking energy and innovation these years while the executive team presented intolerable inappropriate treatment to workers; indeed, HKDC workers generally expressed their respectfulness toward leaders and working partners, as well as the gloried mission of HKDC. In fact, performances may upgrade through strengthening workers' sense of belonging if a more comprehensive and people-oriented human resources and training service can be provided. Besides, complemented leadership frequently influences the cohesiveness of an art organization. Many successful art organizations like Cloud Gate and Hong Kong Philharmonic proved this. Reaching its 32th year, some believe that HKDC is experiencing the transforming stage where their new charismatic artistic director with some energetic new-blood joiners and a knowledgeable executive director may pour energies and enhance the diversified mixture of creation, which reinforces the mission and branding of HKDC.

The production's quality can be analyzed through an artistic director's representation while the organization's potential can be read by executive director's conduction. Actively participating in global and local artistic grand occasions and receiving numerous international awards, HKDC's production wins its reputation among the dance world. The alike artistic styles from the recent two artistic directors are stand-out while fitting its mission. Its increasing involvement with local artists, including dancers, trainers and choreographers, and its image of "a perfect blend of traditional and contemporary Chinese dances with Hong Kong characteristics" have brought HKDC out to the world. The ability to increase the awareness from other professions among the world has enhanced the presenting power of HKDC and its brand. Its management team shared the annual overseas outreach program as one of the largest emphasis areas of HKDC's target mission and the management team agreed to provide full support on resources provision, even if the project may result in negative financial impact. The intangible impact on its branding and audience build up is positive, while the high quality productions were widely acclaimed by the press and audiences. Some art critics foresee that the new branding can lead HKDC to a wider possibility in its creativity; its success in breaking the limitation is a matter of time and reckless cooperative preservation. However, art administration and creators should consider the real purpose of art making when they establish their brand. The concept of Social Equity Brands was introduced by Guy Champniss & Fernando Rodes Vila that brand making should ensure the motivation and consequence of any dialogue is to engage and empower the audience, not the company itself (Champniss & Rodes, 167-194).

Marketing

Without an outstanding and suitable branding image as base, marketing's power often is impaired and undesirable outcome may transpire. In the beginning stages of HKDC, their marketing strategy can be concluded as "old-fashioned" and conservatively passive. Other than using printing promotion materials such as posters, banners and flyers, art organizations during the 90s depended strong on "word-of-mouth" and advertisement marketing style; HKDC mainly focused on their existing audiences, dance lovers and cultural studies anticipants. As Sandra stated, several unique challenges and illuminating possibilities were presented when we measured the performance of marketing strategies of a nonprofit organization; therefore, strategies often accomplished in both financial and nonfinancial terms (Mottner, 829). HKDC faced several regulations and limitations on operation and programming before being corporatized in 2001. Until the government introduced arm's length principle system into decision management for core art organizations in HK, the program's final arrangement can be judged from artistic sensibility and its quality can be ensured to meet artistic proficiency standards while taking financial impact into consideration. Its marketing initiatives also adjusted accordingly, including increasing membership and admissions, and overall promotion tactics. From the traditional marketing measurement of 7Ps, HKDC mainly focused on its product and promotion strategy in the past, and started to explore the people strategy and entrepreneurial marketing in recent years. Its own "loyalty audience group" was established, mainly including professional and amateur dance and art lovers with a small portion of young children and families.

One of HKDC's marketing strategies in the recent decade is targeting its rightful segmentation to maximize the sales, not only limited to existing audiences but expanding to young educated adults with relevant disposable income and the fashionable and curious teenager group. A few years ago, the management team had done an in depth study on their existing audience and marketing plans. Yet from the number-oriented analytical perspective, HKDC has been doing mediocre in generating profit through ordinary marketing. Its performances and box office income has resulted in a significant increase of more than 130%, compared to 2003. However, the number does not tell the full truth. Aiming to market the rightful groups and widen the audience base, management has changed its tactics and programming by balancing its artistic choice on programming. Compared to the era before 2001, Yang said that the artistic director works closely and compatibly with the executive director on annual and long-term program planning. With common idealistic vision on HKDC's proficiency enhancement and business sustainability, the program through this decade has been highly presentable with diversified and innovative elements. Recent shows have transformed the image of "old-school" traditional folk dance into a spiritual, renovated high art. Unquestionably, the program itself already has the best product strategy because HKDC has cooperated with countless famous international dance and other art form companies, well-known stories or dance galas, worldwide status artists and choreographers. There is usually 2-3 ambitious signature productions (young adult), 2 small shows focusing on children's topics (children or kid learner), 2-3 medium shows cooperating with other organizations or societies or with cultural heritage and deep folk favor (existing dance lovers), and 1-2 small experimental shows for artistic creativity exchange and connect (teenagers or art/culture lovers).

However, audiences were spoiled with over-easy accessibility for performing art affairs and overloaded with choices to spend in their leisure time. How to differentiate among those excellent competitors is a large challenge in the art world, especially while audiences' desire and preference are more deliberate to fulfill. Executive director David Tsui shared confidently that HKDC has realized its potential in reaching out to previously left-out segmentations while strengthening existing customer's loyalty and retaining them to long-term relationships. They try to target teenager and youth adult groups for some "modernized and high-status representative productions" while using interactive games and Q&A lottery activities from social media such as Facebook fans pages and twitter art press releases to bring their attention. One of the example is a recent production, *Storm Clouds*, which has launched a very innovative and interactive promotional game on their official Facebook page: they post pictures of *Storm Clouds*' main characters with their dazzling costumes and attention-grabbing dancing moves in ordinary local places among Hong Kong districts and ask for responses to point out the location of the photo being taken to win that particular performance souvenir. This seemingly childish game has brought up a question of how favorably this works as audience engagement and how audiences' tastes vary from different segmentations. Regardless of the later analysis on the data and the very small number of "likes" and "share" from Facebook fans on this affair, this marketing tactic indeed is a niche for the teenager group, who enjoys discovering than being told, "professional in social media and information spreading, favorable in interaction with peers and being engaged. Most importantly, even some mature local audiences may tease at this game, but it successfully catches their attention and increases their awareness.

As in the Facebook game example above, technology's rapid growth and innovative inventions nowadays changed people's living style and consumption practices completely, as social media and internet play a more important role in information transformation and propagation. Online marketing became another new trend on strategy planning (Hill & O'Sullivan, 269-333). Not only for the social media advertisement, HKDC also tries to engage the public and widen its acceptancy through providing insight videos, performance previews, and interviews before and after the performance, etc. The unbreakable relationship between the company's performance, marketing and audience development is significant. Audience's favor is not the only concern for a corporatized art company like HKDC. How to sustain its financial support while maintaining its professional quality of production and expanding market is the main task for the executive team. Since LCSD launched the Venue Partnership Scheme, HKDC also benefits from its place advantage in which their medium and small shows can be played at Tsuen Wan Town Hall for lower rental costs. Due to its high profile of previous performance sale and good record in quality, other static high quality venues such as Hong Kong Cultural Centre and Hong Kong City Hall also prioritize HKDC's proposals on their program. These venues already act as perfect physical evidence strategy. On the other hand, People strategy is another newly built up strategy whereas they displayed sets or some pops at the entrance and train FOH workers with presentable manners and marketing tactics.

In order to maximize the usage on the marketing budget, Tsui pointed out that HKDC target to review their marketing plan per quarter also reallocated their budget accordingly. For example, they decreased the number of off-site outreach programs and showcase performances to local primary and secondary schools, due to its relatively low return and unsuccessful market driven. Instead they focus on targeted segments with direct and online marketing, such as subscription through social media with school that has a particular dance extra-curricular interest class or art programs, inviting particular interest groups from different societies or schools to gather to a venue (mostly Tuan Wan City Hall as they have the working partner scheme) for a short art piece showcase or activities fun-day, or an education oriented experiment workshop. From analyzing historical data on audience's feedback and student reactions, HKDC believes that this kind of switching financial arrangement for particular segments may lead to positive impact on building audience's trust and relationships in long-term development.

Other than utilizing the marketing budget on possible sales and education, the executive team also has strengthened its approach on marketing the sponsor and funder. Doyle. P once mentioned in his book that marketing is all about decommunitising the company's offer (Doyle, 371), whereas raising the awareness and recognition among possible sponsors is the second half of successful marketing. As understanding the importance of transforming marketing to integrated marketing communications, HKDC is trailed to reinforce its relationships with previous donor and sponsors by having exclusive performance for their non-artistic performance activities and even attend their social events for corporate social responsibility functions, as well as continue sending friendly invitations on their updated artistic social events. As a professional dancer and choreographer with numerous global awards, Yang was building up positive image among media by his strong background. The mass believes that with his ability and characteristic as part of the HKDC's new brand, his leading team is likely to be influenced and exalted to attract another group of segmentation and sponsorship. In the recent few years, different than most art organizations in Asia, HKDC has overcome its resistance to marketing and increased its transparency level to the public, not only limited to targeted audiences but also potential segments in extended geographic aspects. As discussed, by targeting different segments with adjusted marketing tactics, HKDC aims to position itself in a leading role on preserving heritage dance, encouraging creativities with HK elements in ethic dance and promoting dance education.

Audience Development

An effective marketing appeals to a target consumer's core values, lifestyles and interests; indeed strengthens their relationship with the company in a long terms perspective. In order to result in excellent audience development, art organization must distribute a comprehensive and customized marketing strategy that reinforces its mission and brand. The result varies by its external factors such as the society's government regulation and policy, the cultural atmosphere, the market status and the art form's development. Generally speaking, comparing to other developed countries Hong Kong art organization tends to resistance of marketing methods and under-evaluated the importance of integrated communication and audience relationship. Through recent years' maturation, HKDC is pursuing to increase the accessibility, retain its existing audiences and explore new audiences.

Targeting to reach its major goal of audience development, and increase accessibility, HKDC increases its marketing tactics to larger group of audiences, expanding the possibility of audience's participation and enhancing customer service and assistance on ticket purchase and information provision. They increase their involvement in large-scale public events such as the collaboration project *Folk Dance Fiesta* to expand audience variety and openness for community and public. Lately their outreach program stated that they have redesigned their website to be more user-friendly, and concentrated on social media technique in link swapping, as well as changing their advertisement content as mentioned earlier to increase the acceptance level of information spreading. On the other hand, sharing creativity and production insight, such as a "behind-the-scene" and script-interpretation sharing seminar, leads to higher satisfaction from the audience's perspective. These "experimental" approaches seem idealistic in western countries but the effect to HK audiences is still under analysis. Regardless of the beneficial finance impact, increasing accessibility can increase the organization's status and branding, as well as increase the openness for potential markets.

Audience building is about execution from art administration, exposure from the audience and enhancing their experiences. Retaining the existing audience can ensure an organization's portioned income. After success in audience building attracts their attention and provides 1st time experiences, art organization must consider its long-term relationship to retain. In the Harvard Business Review on

Increasing Customer Loyalty, Rigby stated that many organizations including the art field often succeed in customer retention by investing in information systems analysis on customer relationship management systems (Rigby, 121-130). Although this requests huge amounts on its system's supporting costs which is not economically feasible or affordable for most art organizations, the initiatives behind this process strategy are worth consideration for strategic plan formation, especially for Asian countries. Frequently stated is that art marketing products do not respond to the market itself only, but more important is to find the right audience for it (Colbert et Al., 2001); artistic manager and executive decision makers act as a speed dating agency. As mentioned earlier, HKDC has been applying to multi-segment marketing with consideration of its integrated marketing communication to both existing and new audiences groups. For example, they have customized their programming to fit different audiences' taste and wants; the marketing strategy and methodology behind this are also slightly adjusted for different segmentations. However, they are also keen on launching the untypical strategy, such as a focus on children and their guardians.

As the dropping birth-rate and worsening relationships among families due to changing lifestyles, retired elderly cherish attending leisure activities with their grandchild, especially those that can enrich their enjoyment and knowledge. The population aged over 65 will reach 28% (approximately 230 million) of the whole Hong Kong population by 2030 (Hong Kong Population Projections 2012-2041). In order to survive and enhance art acceptance, developing new audience segments is a must as we often link this to art education and outreach programs. As discussed earlier, dance is different than other art when results in more challenge in promotion. To increase their service objectives, they have promoted and built strong relationships with local schools and training institutes among HK districts. In order to break the barrier of low interest from children and increase their production efficiency, they run exclusive learning "Artist-in-residence" programs and experience blackbox workshops for students. Other than "School Touring Performance," promotions for children and youth troupes training courses to increase accessibility for children, HKDC also increases its performances at local venues as well as the venue partnership scheme participants, while providing transportation arrangements and combining participant's variety as increase their inspiration through diversity. In order to increase the awareness among guardians, they provide opportunities for participation in joining large productions with HKDC dancers, assisting in experience sharing and interacting workshops for new participation. Most interestingly, HKDC found the performance for participation to perform and teach their guardians. Both children and guardians' satisfaction are fulfilled and their positive feedback toward HKDC can be easily found. Mass believes that the success behind is mainly due to appointing "retired" dancers acting as the troupes' executive and artistic coordinator. Again, any aspect's success is made from a multiple aspects cooperation, which reflects the ability of those leaders' management.

Change in audience mix and their artistic preference lead to completely different strategies for new audience exploration. The fact that the Hong Kong audience is strongly influenced by the impact from westernization, modernization, and "blind-follower," an audience's art taste tend to change unpredictably as the loyalty level seems no longer high compared to the last century due to a general decrease in performing art activities' consumption these few years, mainly to dance, classical music, traditional folk art and drama (Gars, 29-61). Therefore, HKDC never closed its market to any segment, as many argued their unclear segmentation is the result from their unclear branding image. Until recent years, through its management system reformation and strategy enhancement, they put more focus not only on children's education, but also overseas market exposure.

Tsui shared that the company places great emphasis on overseas cultural exchange and values overseas performance to showcase the unique culture of Chinese dance of Hong Kong characteristics. Numerous prestigious awards were received and much professional recognition was placed in recent years; remarkably, these encourage and fascinate artists to drive for excellence and enhance their confidence in reaching out to the world. For example, the signature show *The Legend of Mulan* has received several awards in different dance societies, such as "Outstanding Production" from 2014 Hong Kong Dance Awards and "Best Dance Show" from The Hecklers 2013-14. Other than one overseas exchange trip annually, the accomplishments from both Children and Youth Troupe are extraordinary and inspiring. From the performance of the dance poem *Spring Ritual - Eulogy* at National Centre for the Performing Arts in Beijing, HKDC's status in the Chinese art world was established. HKDC also actively participates in co-operation projects with *Spring Ritual - Eulogy* Taiwan in 2013 (Taipei National Palace museum seminar and Hong Kong Week 2013 @ Taipei), *Qingming Riverside* at Canada and United States in 2012 (chosen by the Ministry of Culture, People's Republic of China as a cultural exchange event), and many other medium exchange and community performances held around

other countries. The only downside of these exchange tours is the outrageous expenditure. However, through years of relationship build up with societies and organizations globally, the cost started to be paid off from more opportunity. The educational program with the Education and Youth Affairs Bureau of Macau, for example, proved HKDC's determination and efforts on exploring audience and entrepreneur marketing, also marching toward financial independence from fund development. Although this is only the beginning stage, HKDC's action indicates its strength of mind in furthering its development.

Potential and Possibilities in the Future

As Yang shared in the interview, "... Convergence and tolerance should be the essence in the creative idea of "Hong Kong Originals," acting as a cultural ambassador to continue to grow with innovative creation and financial balancing is challenging for HKDC. There are many other elements not being taken into account while some core factors are left out in management of art organization. Aside from achieving cost-effectiveness, efficiency, productivity and high quality performance, fulfilling creators, funder and government's requirement while maintaining audiences' satisfaction sometimes seem to be in conflict. Among these challenges and threats, many alternative possibilities can be done such as building up powerful brands. If it is nurtured and managed properly, brand can give companies' longevity and the potential for immortality, even benefit the company in its unique competitive edge (Temporal, 3-28). On the other hand, effective social media marketing strategy shall be utilized in a wider level to attract and retain audience's attention. At the same time, audience expansion is hiding large possibilities, especially for those untargeted segments and minority groups, such as the elderly, the new immigrants, homosexuals and foreign visiting-professional's spouses. If audiences rely on their artistic languages or sensation analysis from other art form experiences, they will probably result in frustration. Therefore, the audience-mix varied from place to place, time to time understanding their needs and wants while evaluating the desire from artistic perspectives on program design and decision making in main task for management.

The most important and original purpose of art creation is to build meaning through art in life. Artists should not only open to learn, perceive, and grow from the enriched history and cultural inspirations from other genres, but indeed to stay eager and sensitive to the surroundings for deeper aspirations for self-expressions in creation. The possibility of Hong Kong, even Asia and the world, is infinite in the performing art community. To be competitive at Hong Kong's art market, the direction on focusing IMC approach, funding sustainability, and long term audience relationship development seems the solution to open a new status page for HKDC's future sustainability development.

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