

How do the theatres in Budapest communicate their mission and values?

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the communication strategies of theatres in relation to their missions and values. While it is widely accepted and encouraged in a general market context to explicitly communicate missions and values to both regular and potential customers, as well as all stakeholders, theatres in Budapest appear to differ in some aspects. Using sample data from the field to illustrate the concepts of the relevant literature conference paper tries to identify several factors explaining why theatres in Budapest almost never formulate written mission statements. This phenomenon can be explained by programming with well-defined branding, audience partition, sharing artistic resources (actors and creative personnel), and financing structure with public subsidies.

Keywords: theatres, Hungary, organisational mission and values, cooptation

JEL codes: Z1, L3, M3

Introduction

The theatre life represents a vibrant and colourful part of the cultural landscape in Budapest. We will focus on different communication strategies of theatres in relation to their missions and values. It is widely accepted and encouraged in a general market environment to explicitly communicate missions and values to both regular and potential customers, as well as all stakeholders, theatres in Budapest appear to differ in some aspects. Written mission statements and the expressions of values are rarely found in theatres. The paper tries to identify several factors explaining why theatres in Budapest almost never formulate written mission statements. These reasons include programming with well-defined branding, audience partition, sharing artistic resources (actors and creative personnel), and financing structure heavily reliant on public subsidies. Firstly, we present the theoretical arguments for formulating missions and values followed by an introduction to the theatre market of Budapest, and finally, we use the concept of 'cooptation' (a mix of competitive and cooperative elements in the market). We argue that this concept is applicable to Budapest theatres, indicating a direction for future research.

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Mission statement for theatres

Mission statements can play a critical function when articulating the strategic intent and ideological framework of theatres, particularly for public and non-profit organisations (Bonet et al., 2018). These statements are the synthesis of the identity, artistic and economic objectives of theatres acting as a guiding text for both internal stakeholders and the public community. The significance of mission statements in non-profit and mission-based theatres reflects a complex interplay between artistic vision, community engagement, and organizational sustainability (McMillan, 2023).

Two typical examples (see Table 1) show that a mission statement can briefly define the unique identity of a theatre and its role in distinguishing it from its competitors in the cultural marketplace. Mission statements correspond the brands theatres build and maintain. This distinctiveness is not just a marketing tool but a strategic articulation of the purposes of theatres.

Table 1: Examples for mission statements

„The Young Vic is driven by seven core values which underpin all that we do, both on stage and off, to make the Young Vic what it is today - bringing together artists, communities and audiences on a global scale and using the power of stories to change our world.

We believe theatre is at its best when everyone participates.

We are driven by relentless curiosity and debate.

We believe in pioneering and in leading into the unknown.

We are led by the creativity of our people and the limitless possibility of imagination.

We collaborate: working together to achieve shared goals.

We lead with kindness - with heart, with care, and with the wellbeing of our people.

We are committed to openness rooted in trust.”

Young Vic London UK

(<https://www.youngvic.org/about-us/about-us> retrieved on 17.11.2023)

„Its mission is to be a comprehensive centre for contemporary performing artists, focusing on interdisciplinary, experimental art and talent development, where creators from the region can realize their artistic visions under professional conditions and develop in a supportive environment.

Its goal is to provide a creative workshop and a common platform for the region's geographically and professionally diverse artistic community.”

Bethlen Téri Theatre, Budapest, Hungary

(translated from Hungarian, <https://www.bethlenszinhaz.hu/a-szinhazrol/> retrieved on 17.11.2023)

It sets the commitment of the theatre to certain artistic or aesthetic values and social responsibilities, and sends a message to various stakeholders, especially with the founders (Ministry or Municipality) to build public trust. Transparency and consistency in conveying the mission and its corresponding values are profound to establish and maintain this trust. The mission of the theatre could enhance audience perception and loyalty. A clear and unique mission can become an orientation point for individuals and groups with shared values or

cultural interests. This can lead to a more engaged audience, fostering long-term relationships that extend beyond consuming cultural goods to being part of their identity.

Operational decisions within a theatre are also determined by its mission. Programme choices and building the repertory and ensemble are formed based on the mission summarized in a mission statement to establish coherence and integrity in the activities of the theatre. This alignment is important for maintaining focus on the core principles and avoiding mission drift, particularly in an environment of shifting artistic or social trends and audience expectations.

The communal aspect of the mission of a theatre is particularly important. Shared values among the workforce, potential partners including creative teams and the audience contribute to a dynamic cultural community with the theatre itself. For mission-based theatres, the community is not only an audience but also a participant in the cultural dialogue facilitated by the activities. This community-building aspect is integral to the social impact and audience development strategies of the theatre (Klaic, 2012; Bonet et al, 2018; McMillan, 2023). Bonet et al. (2018) argue that the articulation of the mission is instrumental in securing funding and support from both public and private sources. Philanthropic entities and governmental bodies often prioritize organizations whose missions align with their own objectives and values, using mission statements as a measure of potential impact and alignment with broader cultural and social goals. Based on the theatre management literature we can presume that a well-written mission statement is vital in many aspects, but it can thus be a driving force for theatres to attract financial resources (revenue and subsidies) necessary for its sustainability and growth. Widely considered, therefore, that mission statements are not mere formalities or cursory components of organizational literature; they are strategic tools that define the identity, purpose, and aspirations of theatres. They serve as fundamental tool for building trust, attracting and retaining audiences, guiding operational decisions, fostering community, and attracting funding.

Table 2: Functions of mission statements at theatres

<p>Define Identity: It distinguishes the theatre from competitors.</p>	<p>Build Trust: Transparency in mission and values builds trust with audiences, and other stakeholders.</p>
<p>Attract Audiences: A clear and unique mission can attract audience with similar values or interests.</p>	<p>Guide Decisions: It ensures that programming and operations are aligned with the core principles.</p>
<p>Foster Community: Sharing values can help to create a sense of community among the audience and the theatre's workforce.</p>	<p>Support Funding: People or private firms often look for organizations whose missions align with their own philanthropic goals.</p>

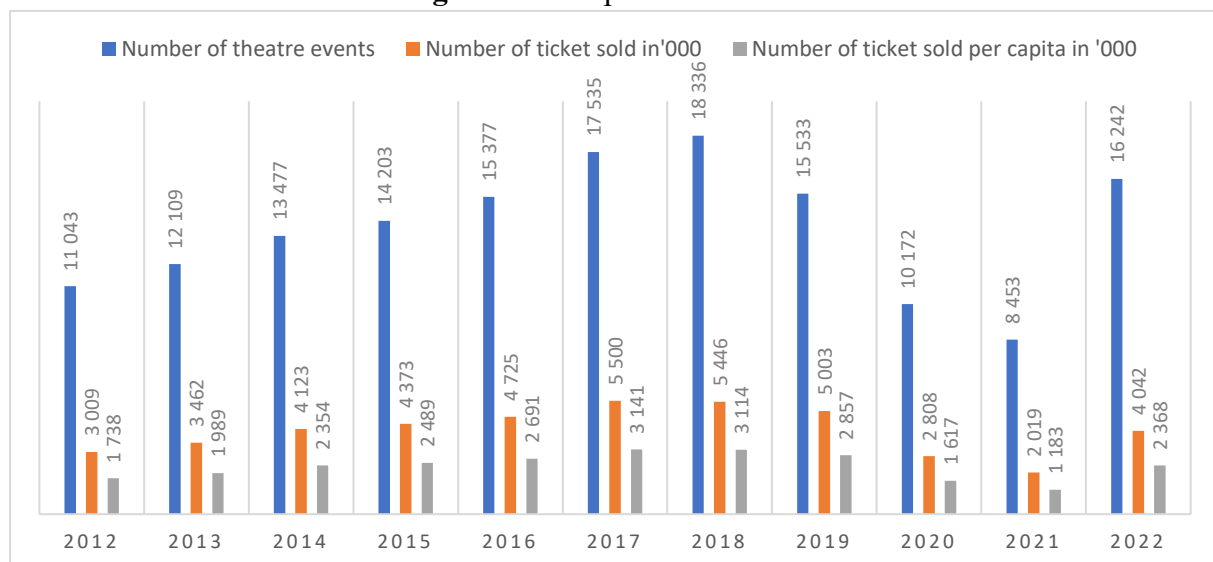
Source: Synthesis of works of Bonet et al. (2012), Klaic (2012)

The thriving theatre landscape of Budapest

In Budapest, the vibrancy of the theatre scene is evidenced by an impressive annual output of over 16,000 events and the sale of more than 4 million tickets (see Figure 1), resulting a high number for theatres sold per capita, more than 2 tickets per a Budapest citizen. One of the rare comprehensive survey shows, however, a substantial proportion of the population – approximately 50% – never engages with the theatre (GfK, 2015). The city's theatrical infrastructure is diverse, comprising more than 40 brick-and-mortar theatres that range from state-operated to privately owned, both for-profit and non-profit. These theatres maintain a rotating repertoire supported by a permanent artistic ensemble; a model reminiscent of the renowned Moscow Art Theatre similar to other Eastern-European theatres (Klaic, 2012).

KSH (2009, 20170) shows a well-established, strong market of theatres in Budapest and in Hungary alike. The theatres in Budapest are characterized by their specialization in a variety of genres, such as drama, comedy, musicals, operettas, dance, opera, ballet, puppetry, and mixed genre. This specialization can be also seen by targeting specific audience demographics: productions are tailored for adults, youth, and children, allowing theatres to cultivate and engage with distinct audience segments. The branding of these institutions is marked by a strong aesthetic style, reflecting not only an artistic vision but also serving as a strategic tool for differentiation in the cultural marketplace. According to published research and surveys (e.g. Hunyadi, 2005) audience demographics reveal a middle-class predominance, with two-thirds of the audience being women and a significant portion characterized by an older age group, colloquially referred to as having 'greying hair.' (Phrased widely used in theatre discussions).

Figure 1: Budapest theatres in numbers



Source: KSH (2023)

On the day of the conference (November 9, 2023), 52 performances could be found there ranging from children's theatre to opera: Children & young: 9, contemporary: 8, classic: 7, dance: 3, performance: 1, mono: 2, readout: 2, musical: 8, comedy: 10, opera: 1, circus: 1 (data

from <http://www.port.hu/szinhaz> accessed on 17 November 2023). This strategic scheduling is part of a broader marketing and audience engagement strategy that the theatres of Budapest employ to maintain and expand their audience base.

Strong brands and cooptition of Budapest theatres

In exploring the market of Budapest's theatres, one is puzzled by the lack of written mission statements among such professional organizations with only one theatre documenting its mission in writing. Voss et al. (2000), Klaic (2012) and Bonet et al. (2018) point out the importance of programming in theatre strategies, especially in their communication, but it seems that in Budapest the sector relies almost exclusively on its programming to articulate its brand identity. This branding by programming suggests that theatres are allowing the content of their productions, the composition of their ensembles, and the reputation of their actors, actresses, and directors to implicitly communicate their values and vision. Such a strategy reflects a nuanced approach to branding, one that needs no formal declarations in favour of an identity forged through artistic choices and the experiences of their audiences.

The apparent disinterest of theatre owners or founders in forming and publicizing mission statements could be symptomatic of a broader cultural trend within the sector. Perhaps it is an indicative of a prioritization of artistic expression over formalized strategic communication, or it might point to a potential lack of strategic management experience or managerial approach in articulating organizational purpose. This raises questions about the role and value of mission statements in this market and whether the traditional benefits associated with explicit mission communication are being realized in other ways within the theatres of Budapest.

The nature of the market itself provides further context for this phenomenon. Described as non-competitive, the theatre market of Budapest is characterized by a steady, high-demand audience base and bolstered by significant subsidies. Such conditions may diminish the perceived need for competitive differentiation through mission statements as financial security is less tied to the aggressive marketing of a mission. The market segmentation, with theatres employing brand partitioning to appeal to specific demographics, may also diminish the necessity for a single, overarching mission statement. We suggest that the concept of 'coopetition' may appear to be at play, where theatres engage in both cooperative and competitive strategies. The concept of coopetition has been formed by academics in the last 20 years. The corresponding literature (Jámbor, 2018) defines coopetition as a business strategy. Coopetition is a unique mix of competition and cooperation, manifesting in various forms and scales in business interactions. It represents a strategic approach that companies adopt to balance and benefit from both competitive and cooperative engagements.

In the Budapest theatre market, we can identify signs for existence of coopetition (Jámbor, 2018). The sharing of resources among theatres, such as actors, suggests a collaborative approach to managing market demands. Communication channels are frequently used among directors, financial directors to coordinate their activities, organize meetings along with common interest (e.g. legislation). At the same time, each theatre maintains its unique identity, competing to attract audiences to its distinct brand of theatre. This delicate balance of

cooperation and competition seems well-suited to a market that values diversity and creative symbiosis.

Financial considerations further influence the theatre landscape. Independent theatres, often more constrained in terms of funding, may need to focus on educational and politically themed productions to maintain financial viability. The Átrium Theatre's Donor Day is a good example when communicating mission and value (political engagement in this case) may regain its importance. (<https://www.facebook.com/atriumszinhaz/posts/5987054214675090> retrieved on 17 November 2023)

Conclusion and further research

In conclusion, the Budapest theatre scene presents a unique case study in the communication of mission and values. The lack of written mission statements may seem surprising as in many cultural sectors such statements are considered foundational. Instead, the theatres of Budapest communicate their identity through their productions, artistic ensemble, and audience experiences. This implicit communication strategy followed by all the theatres in Budapest shows that this market has a distinctive feature with competitive and cooperative features, thus it can be seen as a cooptation when theatres, directors, artists are interconnected, intertwined. This market gives no incentive to the theatres of Budapest to explicitly communicate their mission and values. In order to understand the market of the theatres in Budapest, further and deep analyses are needed in the future.

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