

# Cracking *the* Nutcracker

It wasn't a new problem, and certainly not unique to the Cincinnati Ballet. The high costs of maintaining a dance company and ever-increasing competition from a wide range of entertainment options were making it more and more difficult to succeed—or even survive.

The world-renowned Dance Theater of Harlem had been “on hiatus” since 2004. In California, the Oakland Ballet went out of business. Closer to home, Indianapolis and Akron's companies were gone. Even the Cleveland Ballet, which had been known as one of the nation's largest and most successful dance companies, had closed its doors.

By early 2006, the Cincinnati Ballet seemed to be moving toward a similar demise. Subscription and single-ticket sales had been declining for several years. Expenses continued to climb. Something had to

potential audience members, *The Nutcracker* was the beginning and the end of what they knew about the Cincinnati Ballet.

For example, many research participants expressed a lack of confidence in their knowledge of what individual ballets were about. So it became clear that specific information, especially about less familiar ballets, could motivate ticket purchase.

Moreover, participants in the research repeatedly described the ballet with terms like “classic,” “graceful” and “traditional,” but almost never with words that conveyed emotion or a personal connection to the performances.

“The ballet is a very emotional art form,” says artistic director Victoria Morgan. “It can be romantic or sensual, dramatic or comic, even physical and athletic. We weren't hearing anything about the kind of emotion, or the kind of individual connections, we expected or hoped to uncover in the focus-group sessions.”

That lack of emotional connection with “a very emotional art form” provided another key insight. What would it take to make an

## Cincinnati Ballet attracts a younger, hipper audience

be done, but what? A reduction in ticket prices? Staff or productions cuts? Neither seemed tenable in either the short- or long-term.

Because we had recently created a successful marketing campaign for the company's annual production of *The Nutcracker*, the ballet turned to us for answers. We began by reaching out to affluent, “arts-oriented” consumers (one of the ballet's prime demographic targets) with research aimed at uncovering existing perceptions and possible solutions to its dilemma.

### UNEXPECTED INSIGHT

*The Nutcracker* had long been the ballet's signature production, and its largest audience draw by far. But the research surprised many in the company's management when it revealed that, for too many

emotional connection with a larger audience—or audiences? To compete successfully with prime-time soap operas, basketball games and chick flicks?

We created a season-long campaign that has gone well beyond traditional ads built around pretty pictures of pretty ballerinas—and simply promoting “the ballet” to a dwindling group of loyalists. It's a campaign that targets specific demographics, through specific media, and with focused (often in-depth) messages about individual productions.

### SASSY, ROMANTIC, ATHLETIC

To promote last fall's production of *Giselle*, for example, direct-mail targeted a female audience looking for a girls' night out with mailings that began, “He's not who he says he is, and he's already engaged to someone else.”

He's not who he said he was.  
And he's already engaged to someone else.



The direct-mail medium also offered the opportunity to educate potential customers who might be unfamiliar with specific performances. *Giselle's* mailing included a brief description of the ballet's "ethereal heroine... prince in disguise... dazzling ghosts... an age-old story of love and betrayal."

A mailing for Tchaikovsky's *Sleeping Beauty* spoke to families accustomed to Disney-style productions. A storybook illustration was accompanied by a caption that read: "Captivated, he drew closer, and with one tender kiss the evil spell was broken."

And the marketing for *Javelin*, choreographed for 12 men around music written for the Olympics, invited sports fans to "celebrate raw physicality."

New media are key to the campaign's success, too, as the ballet reaches out to younger, tech-savvy audiences. Its website, [cincinnatiaballet.com](http://cincinnatiaballet.com), has added a lively blog where the company's dancers communicate directly with fans. And every new performance is preceded by a "webisode," a lighthearted video production that takes a slightly off-center look at the upcoming show and invites viewer participation.

In the *Sleeping Beauty* webisode, for example, a Trump-like tyrant searches for a Prince Charming to rescue Sleeping Beauty. Viewers were invited to vote online for their favorite, and the promotion generated more than 78,000 votes.

It's making the ballet hip and accessible to a newer, younger, demographic. "We're reaching more people than ever before," says executive director Paul Kaine.

"More important, they're the right people. And we're delivering the right messages to them — messages that are both informative and fun, and that are motivating them to come and see the ballet."

They are, indeed, seeing the ballet. Subscriptions have risen, and the company has enjoyed sell-out performances of both classic and contemporary productions for the first time in many years. Unexpected marketing insight and a targeted, new-media campaign have made the Cincinnati Ballet smart, sexy and successful again. ■



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