

Connection in an Isolating Age: Looking Back on Twenty Years of Engaging Audiences and Marketing Musical Theatre Online

Laura MacDonald

Two decades after the first Broadway musical theatre tickets were sold online in 1996, the marketing of musicals has become even more sophisticated, with long-running, hit musicals from *Wicked* (2003) to *The Lion King* (1997) and *Hamilton* (2017) shifting or supplementing their in-person rush ticket lotteries with digital ticket lotteries, run through apps such as TodayTix. With a few swipes on a smartphone, theatregoers can toss their name into a digital hat and be notified whether or not they have secured discounted tickets to that evening's performance, and all without venturing to the Times Square or West End theatre districts. Broadway was not always an early or swift adopter of digital technology and online platforms (and London has typically lagged behind New York). But since musicals began launching their own websites, the Internet has fulfilled a range of functions for the musical theatre industry and its consumers.

L. MacDonald (✉)
University of Portsmouth, Portsmouth, UK
e-mail: laura.macdonald@port.ac.uk

More than simply disseminating production information or digitizing a traditional print advertising campaign, musical theatre producers have found a wide and complicated range of uses for web platforms. From communicating ticket availability, offering tickets for sale, engaging with fans, and connecting musical theatre creators with their audience, these platforms have expanded the potential reach of musical theatre marketing. In this chapter I outline the growth of online marketing to demonstrate how far the musical theatre industry has come in harnessing demographic data and celebrating fans' commitment to particular musicals, to create and sustain global, online communities of musical theatre spectators. Theatre's "communities, by the active choice of assembling to attend plays, are more apparent as groups to themselves and to others than are the more abstract literary communities," Marvin Carlson points out, and this chapter investigates the engagement, capture, and visibility of such assemblies once they shifted to online platforms.¹

Like any other consumer product, Broadway musicals have a brand experience to offer and online marketing is increasingly consumers' first point of engagement with a musical brand. The Internet is also the place where musical theatre consumers will continue to engage long after attending an ephemeral live performance, and their Instagram selfies at the theatre or fan performances on YouTube are far more valuable to a musical brand than a Playbill left on a coffee table at home. The group nature of theatre going Carlson privileges has thus intensified online. "The pressure of audience response can coerce individual members to structure and interpret their experience in a way which might well not have occurred to them as solitary readers," Carlson notes, and musical theatre fans have a myriad of opportunities to coerce fellow fans and spectators, whether through likes, retweets, YouTube comments, or blog posts, to commit to a particular, perhaps more emotional and public experience of musical theatre.² The byproduct of this publicized experience, I suggest, is the extension of a musical's brand.

The online brand experience begins the storytelling that ticket buyers will experience at the theatre, and social media platforms allow musical fans and spectators to participate in musical theatre marketing, promoting individual musicals through online activities and helping marketers to expand a community of ticket buyers. Carlson laments the limited scholarship investigating "what an audience brings to the theatre in the way of expectations, assumptions, and strategies which will creatively interact with the stimuli of the theatre event to produce whatever effect the

performance has on an audience and what effect the audience has on it,” but now the Internet provides a site through which to collect audience expectations, interactions, and effects.³ Online musical theatre marketing may offer some stimulus, but it also facilitates interaction, and values the effect of theatre *and* audience, in ways not previously possible or visible, which this chapter seeks to map. Whether for theatre geeks or tourists, preteens or musical theatre queens, musical theatre marketing increasingly provides connection in the isolating age of twenty-first century life lived online.

TIMELESS ADVERTISING AND TICKET SALES STRATEGIES

While tickets for plays and musicals have always been available for sale at theatre box offices, in 1894, Joe Leblang started selling discounted tickets to Broadway shows in his small tobacco shop on West 30th Street. Leblang had gotten into the discounting business as a result of marketing. Broadway press agents offered shopkeepers like Leblang free tickets in exchange for displaying theatre posters in their windows. Leblang agreed, but started to resell his free tickets, and those of other shopkeepers, eventually formalizing the business as the Central and Public Service Theatre Ticket Office. He later followed the theatres north to Times Square, installing his cut-rate ticket business in the basement of Gray’s Drug Store between 42nd Street and 43rd Street.⁴ Leblang’s staff shouted out the ticket prices, which were reduced the closer it came to show time. Leblang also expanded to selling tickets by mail and by telephone. After his death in 1931, his family continued to run the business, which evolved into a premium ticket brokerage.

Leblang’s innovation, born in the nineteenth century, illustrates key strategies that Broadway marketers continue to employ in the twenty-first century. Marketing Broadway shows must be as much about advertising the show itself as it is about offering opportunities to purchase tickets, and Leblang was the middleman, between the producers and the audience, the role musical theatre marketing still plays today. His move north to Times Square, to be near both the product, and his customers, illustrates marketing’s crucial position—to be intimately connected to the product, while also reaching outside the market to recruit more customers. Leblang reacted to new technologies like the telephone, incorporating it into his business, just as musical theatre producers would gradually incorporate the Internet into their marketing campaigns.

Leblang's successor, the Theatre Development Fund's half price TKTS booth, was established in 1972 in a trailer in Times Square and is now permanently established there under an enormous red staircase. The TKTS booth is at the center of Broadway's largest advertisement—Times Square, with all of its billboards advertising musicals. Even the simplest Broadway marketing campaigns, such as *The Phantom of the Opera's* (1988) mask logo, will at a minimum indicate a telephone number and web address for purchasing tickets—simultaneously selling the musical's brand and actual tickets.

For decades producers had relied on traditional print campaigns in newspapers and magazines, posters and billboards in public places (including on the sides of buses), and radio spots. Harold Prince suggests that he and his producing partners made a mistake with their treatment of the musical *West Side Story* (1957) during its run on Broadway. Having relied on a traditional print advertising campaign and the media coverage expected for a hit show, by 1959, Prince and his co-producers thought they had run out of an audience. Trying to keep the show running until the national tour launched, they lowered prices and introduced a two-for-the-price-of-one policy—and promptly sold out. "We had run out of one audience and into another," Prince explains. "Ticket prices were too high even then for a substantial segment of our audience which indeed is interested in going to the theatre."⁵ Ticket pricing, Prince believes, must demonstrate an awareness of a show's different audiences in order to sustain longer runs. But without data on purchasing habits and demographics, he and his co-producers were isolated from their theatregoers, limited to rough, instinctive choices. Such isolation led many producers to focus on developing a musical's hit show status through title recognition, and blunt, imperative suggestions to join a particular community of theatregoers who were in the know and keeping up with Broadway trends.

Pippin (1972) and other musicals experimented with television ads in the 1970s, and credit cards and computerized ticketing brought new efficiencies to ticket sales. With demographic studies conducted from the 1970s onwards by the League of American Theatres and Producers (now The Broadway League) as well as by individual producers, more information was available on theatregoer demographics, including their media preferences, which producers used to purchase more targeted advertising. But although research data could reveal which television programs a prospective ticket buyer might be watching and what newspaper she

might be reading, such media buys did not facilitate an active or meaningful relationship between a musical and a theatregoer.

Broadway musicals had long addressed the theatregoer directly, whether in print ads or through television commercials and radio ads—slogans or voiceovers addressed “you,” and used the imperative mood to invite or insist that “you” come to the theatre. “*Dancin’. Dancin’. Dancin’*. Come and see *Dancin’*, a new musical song and dance entertainment,” a television commercial voiceover commanded, introducing the new musical in 1978.⁶ Production numbers from musicals such as *Grease* (1972) and *Sweeney Todd* (1979) were not only staged for the camera when television commercials were filmed, but often featured performers looking directly at the camera, as if to break the fourth wall of the television. This attempt at direct engagement was nevertheless mediated, and while television advertising led to measurable increases in ticket sales, it was not even a simulation of the intense connection live performance facilitates for audiences. A *Cats* (1982) commercial in the 1990s anticipated the engagement theatregoers would enjoy in the future thanks to Internet platforms. Rather than showing performance excerpts, the commercial targeted family audiences. Filmed outside the Winter Garden theatre, the ad included shots of children and fans getting their faces painted, hugs from actors in their costumes, autograph sessions, and a testimonial from a parent who had seen the production nine times.⁷

AMERICA AT THE END OF THE MILLENNIUM

In the mid-1990s, as the Internet was becoming increasingly accessible, many New York City-based companies harnessed the new interactive technology and its myriad communication efficiencies to move their offices to cheaper suburban locations and allow employees to experiment with telecommuting. Ironically, the vacant real estate in Midtown was quickly filled by the most creative people in information technology, who sought both the inspiration of other creative types in Manhattan, as well as proximity to their clients.⁸ Renting just a few thousand feet but requiring services and power 24 hours a day, seven days a week, “[f]or landlords, the onslaught of the interactive technology companies is a mixed blessing,” Claudia H. Deutsch reported in *The New York Times* in 1995. But new media firms were otherwise undemanding and favored quirky, characterful buildings. Typically small companies, they did not demand the standard amenities of the corporate world such as air conditioning

or raised floors.⁹ Realtors saw an emerging market despite initially low rents being paid. Manhattan's Silicon Alley was not only intersecting geographically with the Great White Way, but would help to bring Broadway to the World Wide Web.

Playbill On-Line, a theatre news and listings forum run by the publishers of *Playbill*, launched in 1994 on the Prodigy information service (a platform providing paying subscribers with access to a network of online services). From 1995 onwards, news was posted directly on Playbill.com. Playbill On-Line forums were also launched that year on America Online, Compuserve, and Apple eWorld. Reporting that summer on the debate over Glenn Close's and Betty Buckley's Norma Desmond character in *Sunset Boulevard*, (1994) Ben Brantley suggested: "Check out the Broadway message boards on the Internet or drop in at the sort of piano bar where the patrons know every lyric from 'Flora, the Red Menace,' and you'll get some feeling for it."¹⁰ As intimate as a piano bar and as likely a venue for theatre news and gossip, the Internet was quickly establishing itself with industry insiders and fans alike. Newsgroups such as rec.arts.theatre.*, and email listservs focused on musical theatre discussion topics such as Stephen Sondheim, were also established in the early 1990s and similarly provided opportunities for musical theatre fans to connect online.

The year 1995 came to a close with the launch of reallyuseful.com, a site for Andrew Lloyd Webber fans, that along with providing information on his musicals, sold merchandise not even available at the souvenir stands in theatres.¹¹ Online access to exclusive content would become a mainstay of musical theatre marketing on the Internet. Reflecting on Playbill.com after its first year, managing editor Robert Viagas suggested Playbill On-Line, "empowers an often-forgotten segment of theatre: the audience. With theatre people from across the U.S. and around the world sharing ideas and feelings in a way never before possible, who knows what 1996 will bring?"¹² The year 1996 brought the launch of another website for audiences, TalkinBroadway.com. Along with providing theatre listings and reviews for Broadway and beyond, the website gave audiences and fans a platform with its extremely popular theatre discussion boards, All That Chat. Both Playbill.com and TalkinBroadway.com helped fans connect with their favorite musicals, but also with each other, to share their passion for Broadway shows. The year 1996 also brought Broadway ticketing online, as the Shubert Organization created the domain Telecharge.com, and Ticketmaster introduced an online

service, to sell tickets and provide Broadway show information.¹³ The ticket agency Theatre Direct International, then owned by Cameron Mackintosh, also launched a website, primarily providing information on Broadway, Off-Broadway, and London productions, with tickets available for purchase by email and telephone.¹⁴

As online platforms were introduced to sell tickets online in 1996, and fans gathered to exchange their views, the groundbreaking Off-Broadway musical *Rent* transferred to the Nederlander Theatre, a Broadway house. With the musical's fan community of *Rent*-heads in mind, the musical's producers, Jeffrey Seller and Kevin McCollum, introduced new pricing and ticketing strategies at the physical box office. Their decisions anticipated producers' future awareness of and engagement with fan communities via online platforms. Recognizing that \$67.50 tickets were prohibitively priced for younger fans of the musical, and that the musical itself advocated for starving artists and young bohemians, *Rent*'s producers began selling the first two rows of seats at \$20 each, to ticket buyers visiting the box office the day of the performance. The *Rent*-heads began lining up the day before performances, camping out overnight on 41st Street, to secure the rush tickets. A crowd outside a theatre box office is usually a good advertisement for a hit show, but within a year, concerned over young fans' safety (drugs were being sold by and to people on the line¹⁵) and seeking to ensure fair distribution of the discounted tickets, the musical's producers revised the policy and introduced Broadway's first ticket lottery whereby any theatregoer could put her name in a hat for a chance at cheap tickets the day of the performance.¹⁶

Other hit musicals followed suit, and ticket lotteries became a new normal on Broadway. More than developing a new ticketing strategy however, Seller and McCollum recognized theatregoers and fan communities in a way that had never been seen before by the industry. The *Rent*-heads' affection for *Rent* specifically, rather than musicals generally, made them valuable as ambassadors for the musical. Offering them affordable access to the musical facilitated their ongoing, long-term engagement with the show, both as repeat ticket buyers (who could potentially graduate to full-priced tickets) as well as passionate, knowledgeable promoters of the show. "The die-hard fans of the show who helped sustain its run, self-named Rentheads, formed Internet groups based on, among other things, the camaraderie that resulted from ticket buying on the street; the number of times people had seen the show,

in how many cities and countries; and quizzes devoted to all the lyrics and music of the show,” Tamsen Wolff explains. “This community’s delight in the show was bound up in their lived experience of going to the theatre and in their understanding of themselves as an extension of the show’s characters.”¹⁷ From *Rent* onwards, harnessing fans’ delight became a more and more central part of marketing campaigns, and a task greatly facilitated by the Internet.

When *Les Misérables* launched lesmis.com early in 1997, *The New York Times* suggested it “may be the theatre’s most ambitious Web site.”¹⁸ The website was created by the web design firm T3Media, which was also responsible for designing sites for the Really Useful Group and the Tony Awards, among other members of the Broadway community. Beyond serving as a portal for practical information such as cast bios, lesmis.com provided audio and video clips, a café for chatting with other fans, news updates, and a quiz with prizes. More unique content allowed site visitors to “study the issue of bread prices in 19th-century France,” or ask the musical’s composer, Claude-Michel Schönberg, “how to pronounce Rue du Bac. He will answer out loud. That’s ‘Roo duh Bahk,’ peasant.”¹⁹ A website for Schönberg and Alain Boublil’s *Miss Saigon* (1991) followed that summer, featuring a gift shop, discussion forum, history of the musical, a quiz, cast lists, and synopses of the story in English, German, and Dutch (the languages the musical was being performed in around the world at the time the website was built).²⁰ More significantly, the homepage was branded with the musical’s iconic helicopter scene and logo, and visitors could click through to purchase tickets, confirming one of the key advantages for a musical in establishing a web presence. In less than six months, show websites were becoming the new normal, as Playbill.com’s report on the *Miss Saigon* website concluded by pointing readers to a central button for accessing other shows’ sites.

But in 1997 it was not only new musicals that were beginning to benefit from the forums for engagement the Internet was increasingly supporting. On October 1, the Rodgers and Hammerstein Organization announced that its website was under construction by T3Media, the company that had already created websites for *Miss Saigon*, *Les Misérables*, the Really Useful Group, and the Tony Awards. Rnh.com was “intended to be an informative, entertaining and up-to-date resource for both the casual browser and serious customer alike,” providing practical information on the musicals in its licensing catalogue, as well as information on productions and an interactive database. “With any luck, this

website will never be finished,” the press release noted, already anticipating the kind of dynamic activity websites could support. Launching the website was compared to an out-of-town tryout, with the expectation of “a very long run.”²¹ The launch coincided with the television broadcast of a new production of *Cinderella*, and as *The New York Times* reported, “The Web site is carrying video sequences from the new production plus scenes from the original 1957 ‘Cinderella,’ starring Julie Andrews, which has never been rebroadcast or released on home video.”²² The musical theatre industry was already recognizing that the Internet could host additional content and could be a venue for adding value, granting musical theatre fans access to otherwise inaccessible material like archival videos.

Traffic to rnh.com became newsworthy itself, prompting the Rodgers and Hammerstein Organization to issue a press release in January 1998. The site had received more than 60,000 dedicated visitors in its first week, and was selected as a “Cool Site of the Day” by Inffinet, an industry review panel. “Oscar Hammerstein II once said that the most important word in theatre is ‘collaboration,’ and that the ultimate collaboration is between a performer and his audience,” the press release enthused. “Likewise, our website is nothing but another blip in cyberspace without you, its hoped-for visitors.”²³ As a licensor rather than a producer, the Rodgers and Hammerstein Organization is not in the business of selling tickets, but nevertheless recognized at this early stage in the history of musical theatre on the Internet that it was a valuable venue for capturing large numbers of musical theatre fans, and cultivating their engagement with musical theatre.

The official websites for individual musicals may offer a range of opportunities for spectators to engage with the musical before and after attending a performance, but the primary function of such sites is always to facilitate ticket purchases. Maintaining an online presence allows producers to gather extensive data on prospective ticket buyers based on web traffic and click throughs. George Wachtel, the president of Audience Research and Analysis and a pioneer in the audience demographic research that began in the 1970s, noted in 1997 that although savvy marketers and ad agencies “recognize the need for good, hard, reliable data ... much of the theatre industry remains mom and pop.” Wachtel suggested: “It’s probably the companies like Disney and Livent that will push the industry along.”²⁴ When Disney premiered *The Lion King* later that year at the New Amsterdam Theatre, the reviews were

ecstatic. Disney sold more than \$2.7 million in tickets the day after opening, at that time the largest one-day ticket sale in Broadway history.²⁵ But with performances sold out for the rest of the year, Disney worried potential ticket buyers might give up on seeing the show without even trying to secure tickets. Communicating ticket availability for *The Lion King* and managing ticket buyers' expectations (to limit the potential for hostility towards the hit show) would be an ongoing job for Disney in years to come, and one handled increasingly online.

DISCOUNT CODES, YOUTUBE, BLOGS, AND SOCIAL MEDIA: TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY TOOLS

By 2000, online entertainment ticket purchases were becoming far more common, and *The New York Times* Technology section was previewing new websites and providing event listings for live web chats with writers, artists, and other creative types ready to share their process with web surfers.²⁶ Email blasts distributed discount codes for almost all Broadway shows except the biggest hits, and variable pricing—where theatregoers have paid a range of prices for comparable seats in the same section of the theatre—became a new standard on Broadway. TKTS and ticket lotteries persisted, but Broadway marketers were beginning to embrace the very low-cost facility of emailing theatregoers directly regarding discounts—and sometimes at the last minute. Ken Davenport, producer of the Off-Broadway hit *Altar Boyz*, was especially creative with his email blasts, and would send thank you emails to theatregoers “on behalf of Matthew, Mark, Luke, Juan and Abraham,” including a discount code for a return visit or to circulate to friends (along with positive word-of-mouth).²⁷ Such emails also encouraged theatregoers to visit a musical's website where they might become even more engaged with the show via quizzes, fan groups, and newsletters.

In the wake of 9/11, online discounting and variable pricing played an important role in luring theatregoers back to Times Square. Central discount sites such as Broadwaybox.com also began collecting codes from a range of sources, allowing theatregoers to price compare and consider multiple shows. Simultaneously, premium ticket services such as BroadwayInnerCircle.com and Telecharge.com Premium Seating could guarantee tickets to popular, sold-out shows, to anyone willing to pay—in 2003, premium tickets on these sites cost between \$150–240.

Shopping for souvenirs online at sites like TheatreMania.com also began to extend musicals' brand presence even further. "Theatre lovers who can't bask in the footlights can turn to TheatreMania.com, a new Web site devoted primarily to Broadway and Off Broadway theatre productions," Shelly Freierman reported, hinting at the growing role the web might play in the lives of fans who could not attend live performances, whether due to geography, finances, or lack of ticket availability.²⁸

Though websites were considered essential for every Broadway musical in the early years of the twenty-first century, for long-running musicals, these sites needed to be updated as online technologies developed and evolved. The first *Hairspray* (2002) website was designed using Adobe Flash multimedia technology, which supports animation and interactive content and helped to tell the musical's story to the site's visitors. But given the musical's more than six-year-long run on Broadway, eventually *Hairspray*'s website needed to be updated to reflect the more current look and feel of the show. Digital marketing specialist Steve Tate worked on the redesign and recalls: "The flash site was more focused around the town and community of *Hairspray* while the redesign turned the focus more visually on the lead character of Tracy."²⁹ Because the website redesign coincided with the release of the musical's film adaptation, it was important for the producers to have a site that visually matched the Broadway production. The iconic artwork of Tracy's face therefore became the first entry point of the site. Tate explains how most websites were abandoning Adobe Flash as a design format because of bugs. "We were looking for quicker load times and a way to direct the consumer to either the Broadway production or the National tour."³⁰

Beyond designing websites, online marketing specialist Situation Marketing (now known as Situation Interactive) opened Broadway producers' eyes to the broader marketing presence a musical could establish online, through banner ads, search engines, and more. In 2006, collaboration between online and traditional marketing teams generated *Hairspray*'s "Big Bopper Dance Topper" dance contest, in partnership with *Ladies Home Journal* magazine and its website, LHJ.com. Contestants submitted videos of themselves dancing to a song from the musical to Hairspraythemusical.com. Ten finalists were chosen and online voting took place over the course of several months, featuring critiques by members of *Hairspray*'s cast and creative team. The winner, Leslie Goshko of Tulsa, Oklahoma, was flown to New York for rehearsals with the musical's dance captain, and performed on stage at the

February 24, 2007 matinee.³¹ The online video dance contest was held in 2006, the same year YouTube began a phenomenal period of growth leading to its purchase by Google.

Covering *The New York Times*' theatre beat in 2006, reporter Jesse Green observed that the use of Internet marketing tools had "reshaped the way the theatre reaches its audience."³² Recruiting theatregoers to share a particular musical via their own social media networks (as *The Color Purple* did in the summer of 2006) helped smaller shows like *The Wedding Singer* (2006), as well as new shows, especially those appealing to a younger demographic more susceptible to viral marketing.³³ Still, Green reported that new musicals' web campaigns in 2006 were allocated just 3–5% of a production's marketing budget. A decade into musical theatre's continuing run on the Internet, Damian Bazadona, the founder of Situation Marketing, explained the long-term consequences of online musical theatre marketing. "If you lived in Missouri 10 years ago, even if you saw a number from a Broadway musical on the 'Today' show and loved it, what would you do?" Able to monitor just how many people are clicking on show websites over their lunch breaks, Bazadona could predict the subsequent listening to other songs, signing up for information about a future tour or even the planning of a trip to New York to see the show in question. "By opening up an instantaneous channel for those with casual interest, the Web may develop the future audience."³⁴ With new platforms like YouTube and MySpace rapidly increasing their users, more and more channels supporting instantaneous engagement with musicals were available for online marketing pioneers like Bazadona to capitalize on.

A new musical long in development, *Spring Awakening*, arrived from Off-Broadway at the end of 2006. Steve Tate was working for Situation Marketing and recalls Bazadona suggesting he upload video of the song "Bitch of Living" to YouTube. The video sharing platform was so much in its infancy that Tate searched online with no luck for U Tube, not knowing what he was even looking for.³⁵ Lead producers Ira Pittelman and Tom Hulse recognized *Spring Awakening* was a new kind of musical and would need progressive marketing to reach a new audience. A music video of "Bitch of Living" had been shot at the musical's Off-Broadway home, the Atlantic Theater Company, and became the centerpiece of the Broadway marketing strategy. It was featured on the website, in banner ads and on all of the production's social media channels. The use of up-to-the-minute online and social media tools helped to foreground the

musical's youthful energy, rather than its nineteenth-century European setting. Capturing the young audience who had made *Rent* and *Avenue Q* (2003) successful became a central goal for the online marketing campaign. From 2006–2010, spanning its Broadway run and first national tour, *Spring Awakening* was not only a part of the early days of YouTube, Facebook, MySpace, and Twitter, but also a crucible for experimentation with these new tools for marketing musical theatre online.

Online video was such an integral part of *Spring Awakening*'s run on Broadway that a blog, Totally Trucked, was launched in 2008 to promote the national touring company using online video. Because the cast of the musical was so young, fans connected easily to them as peers, seeing themselves in the young performers, which made video an ideal online marketing tool. Then-trendy flipcams were used by the tech-savvy tour cast to shoot video, and the online marketing team relayed content requests from fans. Designed using the Blogger platform, Totally Trucked also housed photos and written posts, and along with the videos, this content was regularly pushed to all the key social media channels. The blog's YouTube channel was such a success that it was nominated in the digital media website Mashable's Open Web Awards for "Best Brand Use of YouTube."³⁶

It was perhaps a logical next step for online marketing to stage an adaptation of a Broadway musical on Twitter, and what better musical than a contemporary show created in the age of social media? In the spring of 2009, *Next to Normal* began publishing tweets, a line from one character at a time. Several times a day, for 35 days, @n2nbroadway dispatched more of the musical. A week into the Twitter performance, the production's account had 30,000 followers, and by the final utterance, 145,000 followers. Adapted by the musical's librettist and lyricist Brian Yorkey, the tweets were sent by the characters in the moments they don't speak on stage, creating a digital musical theatre hypertext. "It's telling the story of the show," Yorkey explained, "but telling it from a lot of different perspectives. It was the show — but a new multiangle way of thinking of it."³⁷ The performance tweets were enough to clinch a ticket purchase for many followers, and theatregoers appreciated the thoughtfulness and subtlety of the Twitter musical. Though the social media performance ended the day of the Tony Awards, a Twitter Q&A continued between the production and its followers. Tony nominations certainly contributed to a rise in ticket sales for *Next to Normal*, but Bazadona was confident that the Twitter performance was also a factor.³⁸ His company

had also been renamed, appropriately, Situation Interactive, reflecting a shift in focus away from marketing to more sustained, active engagement with consumers—engagement that, as the Twitter performance demonstrated, can generate sales.

Bazadona's firm continued to design interactive online experiences for theatregoers to engage with their favorite musicals. A 2009 revival of *Hair*, originating at the Public Theater's New York Shakespeare Festival, began filming the post-show dance parties on stage at the Al Hirschfeld Theatre, using a high-definition video camera attached high up at the theatre's balcony level. The filming began in February 2010, one of the more challenging times of the year for any Broadway show, when cold, messy weather keeps tourists away from New York City and New Yorkers away from the theatre. The dance party videos, however, uploaded to hairbroadway.com, could be downloaded to Facebook pages or shared via email and Twitter. Theatregoers could tag themselves in the videos, proudly circulate their brief moment on a Broadway stage, and create buzz for the revival.³⁹ A couple of months into the video dance parties, New York City mayor Michael Bloomberg joined in, generating more buzz, but potentially with an older generation of theatregoers who might even remember the musical's first outing on Broadway.⁴⁰

Introducing a new, interactive seating map in 2010, Disney allowed ticket buyers to select their own seats for *The Lion King*. Tracking customers' choices, Disney learned that theatregoers would often choose better, more expensive seats.⁴¹ By 2011, variable ticket pricing for musicals was being replaced by dynamic pricing, as Disney introduced an algorithm able to recommend the highest price a theatregoer might pay for every single seat in the Minskoff Theatre where *The Lion King* continued to run. The software tool analyzed data from the musical's (at that point) 11.5 million audience members, to recommend the prices ticket buyers might reasonably be expected to pay at specific kinds of performances, such as weeknights in the off-peak winter season, or prime holiday performances such as Christmas. While other musicals used algorithms to increase ticket sales during busy holiday weeks on Broadway, Disney's careful and constant refining of ticket prices made it possible for *The Lion King* to become the top grossing show on Broadway in 2013, the first time for the production since 2003.⁴² Not only does Disney assess consumer willingness to pay, but lionking.com is location-aware so makes sure ticket purchasers are offered the nearest production of *The Lion King*. Any questions a ticket buyer might have are likely covered in

the Ticketing Questions FAQ section, and a carefully marked calendar page indicates what performances still have great seats available.

DRAMATURGICAL ONLINE MUSICAL THEATRE MARKETING

With online marketing and audience engagement well established as key elements in successful campaigns for musicals on Broadway, the precise strategies and a musical website's deployment of the production's dramaturgy are increasingly what help new shows stand out, and long runs keep running. Just as the *Hairspray* website redesign discussed above used the main character's head as an entry point into the online world of the musical, beyond providing practical information and facilitating ticket purchases, musical theatre websites have typically begun to develop consumers' engagement with the musical. Years into its run, *The Book of Mormon* (2011) has vast critical and fan response to mine for pull quotes, but nevertheless uses animated miniature Mormons and the musical's doorbell branding to introduce these positive responses on the website, hinting to site visitors about the musical's playful, tongue-in-cheek depiction of a Mormon mission. But *Mormon* marketing has been sophisticated since the musical opened.

To celebrate the animated television series *South Park*'s 15th anniversary on the air, in 2011, its broadcaster, Comedy Central, sponsored the Year of the Fan, an experiential marketing campaign featuring an exhibit, real versions of snack food from the series, and *South Park* avatars for fans to upload to social media pages, all designed to bring the animated series to life for its fans.⁴³ *The Book of Mormon*, written by *South Park*'s creators, Trey Parker and Matt Stone, had coincidentally opened on Broadway that year. Rather than simply celebrate the new musical's hit status, its marketing has been tailored to its fan base, taking a leaf from the *South Park* marketing book. Instead of quoting excellent reviews in print and online marketing campaigns, *Mormon* producers used social media comments from fans. Emailed news blasts managed expectations, communicating not only the next stops for the two national touring companies, but also building anticipation by announcing when tickets would go on sale for later tour stops. Using the #loveMormon hashtag or following the @BookofMormon Twitter account could alert fans to opportunities to win tickets, and the in-person box office lottery was explained in detail.⁴⁴ A similar campaign was run when *The Book of Mormon* opened in London in 2013, and stood out in the West End

where musicals' use of online marketing and social media was still catching up to Broadway.

Stephanie Lee, President of Group Sales Box Office, a group ticket agency operating since 1960, suggested in the wake of Facebook and Twitter buzz for musicals in the 2010–2011 season that her knowledgeable agents, armed with firsthand details from watching performances, were far more valuable to group leaders than often anonymous social media reports. “Facebook is a way for shows to tout themselves and then hope fans will post on the site so buzz can go viral. That’s a great tool, but the buzz from all these shows can become deafening,” Lee observed. “We’ve found that on Broadway group buyers still want an agent they know who can tell a hit from a flop.”⁴⁵ Lee may be defending the traditional mode of promotion and ticketing she offers, but her dedication illustrates the industry’s awareness of the breadth of its demographics and thus the necessity of offering a range of marketing and ticketing options. One surprise Broadway hit from Disney, however, only made it to Broadway *because* of buzz, much of it anonymous and on social media.

Disney’s *Newsies*, a flop film musical in 1992 but a cult favorite on video and DVD, was nevertheless at the top of the request list with musical theatre licensor MTI, since the company began handling Disney titles in 2004—even though there was no stage version to be licensed.⁴⁶ Original composer Alan Menken teamed with Jack Feldman to expand it for the stage, but it wasn’t until Harvey Fierstein came on board to write the libretto that the musical began advancing through Disney’s development process. A production at the Paper Mill Playhouse in New Jersey was scheduled for 2011 in order to finalize a version of the musical for licensing. During the brief run, fans of the film made pilgrimages and began organizing themselves on social media channels as “Fansies,” to campaign for a transfer of the production to Broadway. When a limited twelve-week Broadway run was announced for 2012 and tickets went on sale, Disney Theatricals executive vice president and managing director David Schrader recalls: “You could see the transactions and the chatter going at the same time. We could see them interacting on Facebook and Twitter—and they actually bought tickets.”⁴⁷ Schrader was witnessing what Damian Bazadona had predicted years earlier—that channels providing information facilitating instantaneous communication around a musical could generate ticket sales. The process had simply become much, much faster.

As the production extended its Broadway run again, and then announced an open-ended run, the marketing team sought to communicate the contemporary relevance of a turn-of-the-twentieth-century story. Traditional campaigns were still run using billboards and bus ads, but *Newsies* had been harnessing social media from the outset, aware of the high-tech, mediatized context of its Fansies' twenty-first-century lives. Cast member Andrew Keenan-Bolger already produced his own web series and so contributed a series of backstage *Newsies* videos that showcased the high-energy choreography while reinforcing the musical's one for all and all for one ethos. This approach easily appealed to Fansies, whose unity and determination helped to motivate Disney, but also resonated with a broader audience living through the Occupy Wall Street protest movement. Fansies contributed to the marketing of *Newsies* by circulating memes, GIFs (the compressed file format that supports image sharing), and tweets that helped to grow an even larger community of *Newsies* fans.⁴⁸ To recognize the Fansies' role in the musical's success, Disney produced limited-edition trading cards for each cast member to autograph and distribute. Fansies could obtain these at the stage door if they had retrieved the correct "code words" from social media to connect in person with *Newsies* cast members.⁴⁹

Connecting with a musical's cast, whether at the stage door or through social media platforms, is one of the most authentic and satisfying means of engaging with a musical for fans seeking to capture and hold on to the live performance experience. As a result of *Newsies*, Disney has a more sophisticated understanding of the power of online marketing when led by cast members and designed to maximize opportunities for audience engagement. Amy Osatinski explains: "After the success of *Newsies* on social media, DTP adjusted its digital marketing plan for all shows. Every company of each production now has a cast member who is designated as the show's 'Social Media Captain.' The Captain is responsible for capturing video and still images and posting them to the show's Instagram account."⁵⁰ Having refined the kinds of experiments *Spring Awakening* made with video and social media, and having taken online ticketing to a new level of responsiveness to the market, Disney has mastered online marketing in the twenty-first century.

Situation Interactive also continues to stretch the creative potential of new technologies on social media platforms. In advance of previews for the 2015 musical theatre adaptation of the film *School of Rock*, the company partnered with Facebook to help *School of Rock* "become the first brand to utilize paid 360° video posts on their platform."⁵¹ The

interactive video of the song “You’re in the Band” allows viewers to look at any part of the scene (filmed in a New York City classroom)—just like watching a musical in the theatre. As paid media, it was filmed and edited by Situation Interactive as a marketing initiative, and paid for by Andrew Lloyd Webber and his producing partners based on the number of times consumers chose to watch the video. This kind of Pay Per Click advertising, in contrast to a campaign made using traditional video footage of the musical in performance, viewed passively by a consumer, is increasingly popular because of its potential to provoke continued engagement with the product or experience being marketed.⁵²

Released on YouTube’s TrueView, the video platform’s choice-based channel where users choose to watch ads (and are thus considered more proactive), the *School of Rock* music video reached consumers who were primed to continue their engagement through the purchase of a ticket to the musical. The video received one million views within three days, generated a 550% spike in traffic to the musical’s website the week the video was launched, and a 160% spike in traffic to the musical’s ticketing website that week.⁵³ *The Lion King* followed within a month, releasing a 360° music video of “The Circle of Life,” produced by Total Cinema 360.⁵⁴ Unlike the *School of Rock* music video, simulating the world of the musical by using a real classroom, “The Circle of Life” music video was filmed in the auditorium and on stage at the Minskoff Theatre where *The Lion King* performs, as if to emphasize the theatricality of live musical performance in contrast to the platform through which a potential theatregoer might be accessing the video.

Navigating an interactive musical theatre performance, like connecting with Disney musical cast members, has the potential to intensify theatre-goers’ engagement with musicals, and make musicals desirable commodities in new and exciting ways. The 1.2 million YouTube views the *School of Rock* video generated in under a week will certainly have led to quick ticket purchases.⁵⁵ Building on the concept album—a marketing strategy originally pioneered by *School of Rock*’s composer and producer Lloyd Webber—another twenty-first-century musical sought to introduce prospective ticket buyers to the potential live musical theatre experience via an intimate online experience. Months before her new musical even began previews, Sara Bareilles, the singer-songwriter who scored the musical *Waitress*, (2016) released a concept album on iTunes.⁵⁶ *What’s Inside: Songs From Waitress* features Bareilles singing all the songs written for the musical’s female characters.

Joined by the musical's lead actor Drew Gehling on two duets, Bareilles also performed the concept album in a concert live streamed by the search engine Yahoo's Live Nation channel. Featuring diner stools, a checkerboard floor, and a sign for "Joe's Pie," (and thus bringing the musical's dramaturgy online), the concert at New York City's City Center venue was staged as an effort to encourage her established fan base to engage with her music on Broadway, extending the musical's reach beyond traditional theatregoers.⁵⁷ Though *Waitress* is adapted from a 2007 independent film hit, the musical's lead producers, Barry and Fran Weissler, recognized the value of digital marketing initiatives. As Barry Weissler explained: "It's absolutely essential that we reach beyond the metropolitan area to national and international [audiences]."⁵⁸ No doubt with the value of national and international reach in mind, Bareilles addresses the camera and greets the fans viewing the live stream. With viewers watching from as far away as Brazil and the Philippines, and comments on YouTube after the concert uploaded there enthusing "I wish I could see the musical," Bareilles' online outreach effort has very likely contributed to *Waitress*' healthy grosses since opening.⁵⁹

CONCLUSION

The convergence of advertising, ticketing and the fan experience on platforms such as WeChat and Weibo has led the growth and expansion of China's young but ambitious musical theatre industry, where producers and marketers are perhaps even leaping ahead of Broadway. The majority of musical theatre marketing and ticketing in China occurs via smartphone apps, and savvy Chinese theatre marketers have recognized that as with any product in China, speed and access are of the essence. Musical branding, whether for large scale productions such as *Man of La Mancha* (2016) or more intimate productions such as *Thrill Me* (2016), seek to position musicals in their potential ticket buyers' daily lives, sometimes through video ads in convenience stores and on subway platforms, but primarily through social media campaigns, which may include banner ads but also informational articles generated by the producers to educate the Chinese audience. Fan buzz is also recirculated by the producers through their official social media channels, but exclusively online (rather than through print marketing). Pre- and post-show photo opportunities are facilitated at performance venues, generating more content for fans to circulate on social media.

But even the largest potential musical theatre market in the world is limited, like Broadway, by the number of seats in theatre auditoriums. Despite the vastness of the Internet, any musical will always have a finite number of tickets available for sale. Decades after television commercial voiceovers used the imperative to command viewers to purchase tickets for a musical, online marketing uses similar phrasing, commanding readers of email blasts to purchase tickets now, watch videos, and win tickets by entering contests. The limited stock of tickets thus makes the swift purchase even more urgent, as the release of *Hamilton* (2015) tickets has demonstrated. In the case of *Hamilton*, online fan engagement has often been focused around ticket availability and pricing, indicating how closely entwined musical theatre marketing, ticketing, and fandom can become thanks to the Internet.⁶⁰

As this chapter has established, over the last two decades new technologies and platforms have made marketing musical theatre online a central element of Broadway business strategies. The consumer's *experience* of a musical has expanded, encompassing a range of interactions from the first impression of an online ad, to a ticket purchase, attendance at the live event and post-show engagement via social media. Consumers demand greater connection in an increasingly digital world, and so online musical theatre marketing strives to offer authentic points of engagement with musicals through their online platforms, whether through vlogging actors, fan selfies, or interactive online performances. This connection consequently recruits theatregoers as ambassadors for musicals, continuing to market musicals on behalf of their producers.

Theatre audiences scholar Kirsty Sedgman (see Chap. 7) questions any assumption that audiences succumbing to intimate engagement with musicals have been taken in by the commercial forces of Broadway. "Rather than seeing musical theatre as a 'pleasure machine', churning out joy for the masses, we might therefore ask how every theatrical encounter can be considered a custom-built experience. This approach better enables us to study how theatrical pleasure is handmade every time, as audiences craft it for themselves."⁶¹ Online musical theatre marketing invites spectators to craft such experiences, but also to personalize them, knowing the personalization may contribute to further extending a musical's appeal and building desire for ticket purchases.

Musical theatre fans active online increasingly seek out this kind of filtering and organization of their engagement with a musical, using hashtags like #fansies or #hamilfans and reacting ecstatically if the musical's official

social media accounts recirculate their comments. Being acknowledged on a musical's official social media channels seems to elevate fans' sense of their engagement, as a personal encounter, but, crucially, one witnessed by the online audience of many other fans. And it is precisely *because* of that online audience that a musical's social media team will reach out to recognize fans—that recognition helps to grow the fan community's affection for the musical and thereby increase future ticket sales.

Musing in *The New York Times* in 1995, architectural critic Paul Goldberger suggested, “cyberspace has a presence as real and as full of promise as the lights of Broadway. It is monumental and noble and intimate, all at once. It is able to do all that real architectural space can do and more.”⁶² Goldberger identified just what makes musical theatre and the Internet such a perfect match—all the promise and dreams musical theatre's emotion-filled songs and dances encapsulate can be sampled via musicals' web presence. Official show websites and social media channels simultaneously facilitate intimate one-on-one encounters with a musical as well as connection with the previously imagined community of like-minded fans. Theatre news sites and fan forums subsequently fan the flames of musical theatre worship.

Goldberger predicted that the mix of anonymity and intimacy provided by the Internet “may be the most startling gift of the computer to social culture at the end of the 20th century.”⁶³ Decades later, Sedgman discusses the fulfillment of this prediction—the “processes by which audiences seek to forge connections—between themselves and performers, and between themselves and their fellow spectators—through posting descriptions of affect and engagement online.”⁶⁴ Focusing specifically on twenty-first-century fans who view spectacular production numbers from the Tony Awards broadcast (Broadway's largest television commercial) via the online video platform YouTube, Sedgman confirms the potential the Internet continues to provide for such intimate encounters with musicals. But as personal and emotional as much online engagement with musicals has become, this gift of the computer to social culture is not only a gift to musical theatre audiences. It is a significant gift to the musical theatre industry, an industry very much alive at the beginning of the millennium, a fabulous invalid no more.

NOTES

1. Carlson, “Theatre Audiences,” 85.
2. *Ibid.*

3. Ibid., 97.
4. Stevenson, "OP-ART".
5. Prince, *Contradictions*, 39.
6. gottagodisco, "Bob Fosse's "DANCIN" Commercial 1978." Accessed September 22, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nrjveIOycIE>.
7. BrooklynCelluloid, *Cats on Broadway Fan Appreciation Commercial*, accessed September 18, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fYrSKkB3U4M>.
8. Deutsch, "On Electronic Highway".
9. Ibid.
10. Brantley, "A Broadway Battle".
11. Marks, "On Stage, and Off".
12. Playbill, "The Year in Review: 1995".
13. Canedy, "Tickets on Sale!".
14. Levere, "Business Travel".
15. Hodges, *On Broadway*.
16. MacDonald, "Rent Changing".
17. Wolff, "Theatre," 134.
18. Grimes, "On Stage, and Off".
19. Ibid.
20. Lefkowitz, "Miss Saigon Attains".
21. Rnh, "R&h On-Line<".
22. "Footlights".
23. Rnh, "Now Playing At A Computer Near You".
24. Grimes, "On Stage, and Off".
25. Lyman, "On Stage and Off".
26. Freierman, "NEWS WATCH".
27. Green, "Producers Use the Web".
28. Freierman, "NEWS WATCH".
29. Tate, "Hairspray Website".
30. Ibid.
31. Jones, "Oklahoman Wins Hairspray Dance Contest".
32. Green, "Producers Use the Web".
33. Ibid.
34. Ibid.
35. Tate, Personal Interview.
36. Ibid.
37. Newman, "It's Broadway Gone Viral".
38. Ibid.
39. Healy, "'Hair' to Help Facebook Generation".
40. Hetrick, "Bloomberg Lets His Hair Down".
41. Healy, "Ticket Pricing Puts 'Lion King' Atop Broadway's Circle of Life".
42. Ibid.

43. Elliott, "Campaign Marks 15th Season of 'South Park'".
44. *The Book of Mormon*. "News from The Book of Mormon".
45. Healy, "Good Tweets Are Nice, But Group Sales Fill Seats".
46. Cerniglia, "Dramaturgical Leadership and the Politics of Appeal in Commercial Theatre," 208–12.
47. Qtd. in Cerniglia, *Newsies: Stories of the Unlikely Broadway Hit*, 119.
48. Ibid., 121.
49. Ibid., 125.
50. Osatinski, "Disney Theatrical Productions: Anything Can Happen If You Let It," 423.
51. Situation, "Driving Views for Innovative Content – School of Rock 360".
52. *Think with Google*. "Broadway's School of Rock Hits the Stage with a 360° YouTube Video".
53. Ibid.
54. Lee, "Watch 'The Lion King's' 360-Degree Music Video for 'Circle of Life'".
55. Situation, "Driving Views for Innovative Content – School of Rock 360".
56. Lee, "Marketing Musicals in the Digital Age".
57. Ibid.
58. Ibid.
59. pianojames111, "Sara Bareilles—What's Inside—Songs From Waitress [Full Concert]".
60. See Chap. 6 in this volume on *Hamilton* fandom.
61. Sedgman, "What's Bigger than a Standing Ovation?," 50.
62. Goldberger, "DESIGN NOTEBOOK".
63. Ibid.
64. Sedgman, "What's Bigger than a Standing Ovation?," 39.

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