

ARTICLE

Forget about selling and start making connections

Written by Madeleine Hinchy
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Image courtesy of Circa.

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Whether it's your first or fourth visit to the Australian Performing Arts Market (APAM), it can be an intimidating experience. There'll be more than 150 international and 250 Australian presenters at the 2008 event. Many of them will be looking specifically for shows to fill their festival or theatre programs and all of them will be hoping to create new relationships. You may have a dream to tour and a product to promote but so will the other hundred or so producers. The question is, with so much competition, how do you get yourself out there, make the connections and negotiate the best results for you and your company?

In 2006, the Australian performing arts companies **Circa** and **Ranters Theatre** attended APAM. Neither had showcases of their work programmed, Ranters didn't even have a booth, but both walked away with an impressive list of new contacts and connections that have led to overseas tours.

Yaron Lifschitz from Circa and Adriano Cortese of Ranters claim that there's no real trick or slight of hand involved when it comes to APAM. Both companies have just developed an acute understanding of how arts markets work and they use it to their full advantage.

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Image courtesy of Circa.

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They say that the biggest mistake people make is to aggressively sell their work and not to genuinely engage with presenters. They feel it is better to approach the event as an opportunity to meet people and learn about the market. If there is a connection with a presenter, they follow it up later, negotiating potential opportunities through letters or emails.

Lifschitz says you also need to establish if you are ready to tour before you attend. Research the market and find out who your competition is. Be clear on why someone would want to book your company over someone else and why they wouldn't. If you only have a hazy idea on why you want to tour and can't explain how you are geared towards it, you won't achieve any results.

"find out who your competition is"



Image courtesy of Ranters Theatre.

This research is important as most presenters are looking for very specific things, to remain part of the game you need to know what they are. Cortese recommends looking at who is coming to APAM before you attend and finding out as much information about presenters as possible. When you are on the ground, walk around and talk to people. Find out what their experience of the presenters has been like and who else might be interested in your work.

Most people are uncomfortably approaching people to set up meetings. Cortese says if you don't feel comfortable, approach presenters informally, introduce yourself and ask them what brings them to the event.

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Image courtesy of Ranters Theatre.

'The only way to get noticed is to create authentic relationships. Don't try and flog your stuff as they won't respond to that. You don't want to come across as a used car salesman! It is a bit more gentle a process. It is about sitting down with someone over lunch and getting to know them, talking about your work. That is what has worked for us.'

Lifschitz agrees that the environment at APAM can be overwhelming for potential buyers. 'Arts markets are often full of shrill people who basically bark at presenters. I think the best thing you can do is to totally forget about selling. We find out what the presenters want. The only way they are going to connect with you is if you take the time to connect with them.'

He recommends talking to presenters directly and finding out why they program work, what their curatorial framework is and what kind of work they may have programmed previously.

Has work like yours been a success for them in the past? If not, they are probably not right for you.

Lifschitz says it is important to be honest if you don't feel a partnership would work for either of you. But while you might not go on tour with a presenter, this doesn't mean the meeting was a failure. He says Circa has learnt that making that connection is what is important. 'You never know who a person is going to turn into or what their next job is.'

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They might also recommend you to someone else who is appropriate for you. 'The strongest form of selling is third party recommendation. We had a tour in Japan that came out of APAM, but not directly. The bulk of stuff happens much later and you are not sure where it comes from.'

Importantly, don't put too much stress on yourself or your company to perform. As Lifschitz says 'if you go to an arts market thinking how you can learn to be a better participant, increase your understanding of your work and others, make friends and connections, then you have done something really good. If you go thinking you are selling you are probably going to be disappointed!'