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## Art Gallery of Ontario: The Barnes Exhibit

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Barnes Exhibit, one of the finest collections of impressionist and post-impressionist paintings ever to come to Toronto, was shown at the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO) in Toronto from September through to the end of December 1994. The AGO knew that it was a critical exhibition, and knew that a balanced, integrated communications campaign would be essential for success. Target attendance objectives were set to include pre-selling 50,000 tickets and total sales of 500,000 tickets. Success was primarily measured by ticket sales, but attention was also paid to hotel occupancy and other indicators that revealed spin-off economic activity.

Advertising the Barnes Exhibit presented several challenges. First, there was low consumer awareness and interest, both about art and galleries, as well as the show and the artists.

Moreover, research indicated that consumers were intimidated by the whole affair. People did not think they could have a good time at a gallery, regardless of the content.

The communication strategy was to turn the Barnes Exhibit into a 'must see' event. To do this the advertising campaign needed to increase awareness of and generate excitement in the exhibit and the artists, then sustain that interest and excitement over a nine-month period, from the pre-show publicity through to the event's conclusion.

Advertising was used to demystify the Barnes Exhibit, and a campaign was created that utilized newspaper, transit, television, direct marketing and public relations to make the AGO, the art and the artists accessible to a broad range of consumers. Four stages (educational, pre-launch and launch, sustaining and countdown to closing) were used, and the results were tremendous.

As a result of this multi-staged campaign, the Barnes Exhibit became the hottest event in town.

There were 250,000 tickets pre-sold against the target figure of 50,000. There were 597,000 tickets sold overall - nearly 20% above target.

The Barnes Exhibit generated spin-off tourism activity throughout Toronto; 60% of Barnes patrons were from out of town and hotels registered well over the 42,000 rooms forecast. Moreover, retail sales at the AGO were excellent and above forecast as well.

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### SITUATION ANALYSIS

In February 1994 the AGO became one of six international art museums that would show the prestigious Barnes Foundation Exhibition, (a selection of works by Renoir, Cezanne, van Gogh, Picasso, and Monet) from the collection of Dr Albert Barnes. It is considered to be one of the finest collections of impressionist and post-impressionist paintings ever amassed by one person. The AGO would open the exhibit in September 1994. This was considered a huge event for the Gallery, so advertising support was crucial. Prior to development of advertising strategy and execution, a feasibility study was commissioned to determine the best price range of tickets, operating hours, forecast attendance and determine what would be the best way to motivate ticket sales.

This initial research indicated very low awareness about Dr Barnes himself, the Barnes Foundation and the collection. There was marginal awareness about the featured artists, and even then, only on a prompted basis. The study was supplemented by focus groups of Gallery members and non-Gallery members. They confirmed that there was very little awareness about the Barnes collection, only moderate interest in the artists (again prompted), and anxiety that consumers would 'look stupid' because the basic understanding of art and galleries was low. In some cases people wondered if 'real' pictures would be shown. It appeared that people were intimidated by galleries, and by art in general. Moreover, in a city that boasts numerous tourist attractions, the Art Gallery of Ontario was not considered a major entertainment destination, and definitely not a place where consumers believed they could have an enjoyable time.

This was an advertising challenge of the highest order: low awareness by consumers, low interest in the show and participating artists, and a high anxiety level among consumers attending the Gallery in the first place. In addition, those who wanted to see the show had to order tickets and commit to attendance dates and times up to three months prior to opening day.

## **THE CREATIVE TASK**

- To increase awareness and build excitement in the Barnes Exhibit and participating artists.
- To turn the Barnes Exhibit into a 'must see' event and sustain interest over a nine-month period - from the start of promotion through the term of the exhibit.

## **OBJECTIVES - THE BOTTOM LINE**

Ambitious objectives were set, for sales and revenue generation, to:

- Sell 500,000 tickets to the Barnes Exhibit.
- Pre-sell 50,000 of those tickets. The 10% figure is the norm, based on rates established by similar events in other major centres.
- Deliver 42,000 room nights at Metro Toronto hotels.

## **STRATEGY**

It was established that the Barnes Exhibit would charge \$15 per ticket, and that the Gallery would be open for 11 hours per day (not the originally recommended 12 hours). The exhibit would open on 17 September 1994 and close on 31 December.

Advertising would have to de-mystify the exhibit. To do this, the campaign would focus on the event itself, creating a face for the Barnes Exhibit that would be engineered through the use of multiple executions in variable-sized print advertising, transit, television, direct marketing and public relations. Part of the advertising had to make the great French paintings non-threatening and non-intimidating.

This campaign also had to generate enough excitement so customers would be willing to buy tickets three months in advance for specific dates and times and sustain the public's interest over a nine-month period. To do this, the campaign was conceived in four stages.

### **Educational stage**

First, it was necessary to generate interest and build awareness about the exhibit's artistic merits, the artists involved and the significance of Dr Barnes. Second, the creation of a sense of urgency was required. The unique opportunity to view the show also had to be stressed, because it would be a 'limited time only' event.

### **Pre-launch and launch stage**

An intense period of activity had to be maintained in the four weeks leading up to opening day. A sense of excitement had to be created that would begin to establish strong word-of-mouth discussions and public anticipation.

## **Sustaining stage**

Multiple testimonials were to be used post-opening day, plus other tactical ideas such as advertising for specific holidays, same day tickets, Sunday night promotions - and even ads to counter rumours of early sell out.

## **Countdown stage**

It was necessary to ensure that interest remained high to the last day of the show, and to generate panic at the thought of actually missing the event.

## **EXECUTION**

The advertising budget for the Barnes was set at approximately \$1 million. Of that, 70% had to be spent out of the Metropolitan Toronto area as part of an agreement with the Ontario government to make this a province-wide event and attract out-of-town visitors. The original name of the show was:

*From Cézanne to Matisse: Great French paintings from the Barnes Foundation.*

The feasibility research and focus group testing already cited suggested that this unwieldy title would be largely meaningless and perhaps even counterproductive in the broad consumer market that had to be reached.

As a result, part of the strategic decision was to shorten this unwieldy name to 'The Barnes Exhibit'. This was done to help make the show's name memorable and accessible.

Black and white, small space newspaper became the primary advertising medium to maximize media dollars. Ads were displayed in various sections of the newspapers, from entertainment to general news. The campaign was launched in the *Globe and Mail* and the *Toronto Star* in April, May, June and July. The *Globe* was the best publication to directly address the primary target group of existing gallery-goers. The *Star* would reach an audience which would not ordinarily come to the AGO. Approximately three ads per week ran, with the headlines changed for every insertion to give the campaign a strong range of appeal. Each ad also included a Ticket King number. This allowed us to track the sales generated per advertisement and, over time, helped monitor the progress of the campaign and its effectiveness. Advertising was also run in the *New York Times*, the *New Yorker* magazine and *Gourmet* magazine.

Focus groups had indicated that consumers were polarized when it came to art. The 'still life' people are less inclined to like 'nudes', and vice versa. Therefore, another strategic decision was made not to show the actual art in the newspaper ads to avoid polarizing consumers. Moreover, black and white newsprint reproduction might actually detract from the paintings and make them seem less interesting, especially to those unfamiliar with the works. This added a creative challenge to the print portion of the campaign: selling a major art exhibit without showing any of the art!

Transit and television advertising started in August as part of the pre-launch and launch stages. Both were adapted to address the visual aspect of presenting the art, since the strength of each medium was its ability to use colour effectively. Overall, the look of the Barnes Exhibit campaign never varied, and every execution, regardless of medium, was always designed to generate further consumer interest.

Direct marketing was an important part of the out-of-town element of the campaign. It was primarily targeted at the travel industry (agents, hotels and group sales). Cities within a day's drive of Toronto were identified as prime markets. These included Ottawa, London, Kitchener, Montreal, Buffalo, Syracuse, Rochester, Detroit, Chicago and Cleveland. Major out-of-town art galleries supplied lists of their members, all of whom were sent brochures informing them of the event.

The public relations efforts centred around launch week, but by that time ticket sales already exceeded 250,000. However, the media attention that was generated helped the momentum build, and the buzz about the Barnes Exhibit started to help make the event the 'must see' that was intended.

## THE RESULTS

The results of the advertising campaign for the Barnes Exhibit were beyond expectation. 'The Barnes', as it was referred to by consumers, became the hottest ticket in town, an absolute 'must see' event. The campaign generated enough interest to pre-sell 250,000 tickets to the show. This was five times the target figure. When the event closed in December, 597,000 visitors had been to the exhibition. This was nearly 20% higher than the forecast.

The AGO's retail sales were higher than anticipated, averaging \$12 per person. This was probably because the first time AGO visitors treated the show as an event to be remembered with merchandise - much as they would at a rock concert.

Preliminary results of an economic impact study carried out by the Ontario Government indicate excellent success in other key marketing areas: an estimated 60% of the Barnes Exhibit visitors were from outside the Metro Toronto area. Hotels were heavily booked, registering well over the 42,000 room target. This was considered significant by the hotel trade, because there was no baseball and little hockey during the duration of the exhibit. The Toronto Transit Commission also reported increased rider-usage figures that could be attributed to the Barnes Exhibit.

Finally, the campaign's efforts even captured the attention of *Globe and Mail* visual arts critic, John Bentley Mays, who wrote:

*Heavy ticket sales, and the general gotta-go buzz one hears everywhere around town nowadays suggest that the AGO's media campaign has been a brilliant success. It's the real masterpiece here, certainly a cut above most of the paintings on display, and a darn sight more thrilling.*

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