Marketing Your Organization in Tough Times
By Susan Koblin Scheer, President, ArtIsIn, LLC.

Effectively marketing your organization during these tough times may seem more of a desire than a possibility. On November 14, 2002 American Express hosted a NAMP Roundtable at its headquarters in New York City, facilitated by ArtIsIn.

Although the participants shared many of the same needs, thoughts and feelings regarding the current challenges and external environment, they represented many of you reading this article.

Good news! Many of the recommendations shared in response to today’s challenges and concerns are simple to implement. Depending upon your organization, you may choose to utilize some or all listed; they can be implemented in a timely manner within your organization; they are realistic, can be designed to be measured, outcome based and require minimal resources:

Continue to develop and cultivate relationships with current funders.
Allocate resources to develop new relationships.
Communicate to the audience at the opening of a performance that you request their presence afterwards to participate in a focus group or market research. Gift and thank them with a t-shirt, mug, or other promotional incentive.
Target your audience. You may choose to target specific organizations or specific age ranges for selected events.
Value your members. Send thank-you notes, holiday cards, and passes to events, openings and performances.

Develop your organization’s brand to its fullest. Your organization is defined by its identity and how it is positioned in the marketplace. It can be argued that brand value goes beyond and involves the relationship between the organization and the customer on an emotional level. It is the sum total of the customer’s experience and is broader than the actual product benefits and features. It is not just making the good or service distinct, but attaching an emotional value to it as well.

Open House-“Press Days”. Send out invitations inviting the Press to a special open house.

Maximize email usage. Develop a database by requesting email addresses from your audience, members, subscribers, patrons, etc. Use email for performance reminders or to provide information about a current show or new shows.

Initiate and cultivate the development of a young supporters’ group. One participant’s organization has begun targeting adults from their mid twenties to early thirties. The organization has been holding gatherings to introduce their art form; these specifically targeted events may include cocktail parties at a “hip scene” or an exciting fundraising event that is planned by the young supporter participants in the group exclusively for their peers.

Develop an educational outreach program to cultivate young audiences and “plant the seed of youth”. Topics may include the history of an artist or choreographer, costume design techniques, or the architecture of a building.

Collaborate with other organizations to share advertising, develop new audiences, garner new stakeholders, or share resources. (Many funders are now very interested in collaborative work.) Collaborations may be cross discipline.

Become a participating organization in a consortium (e.g. theatres). As a member of a consortium you may receive benefits including reduced or bundled costs for advertising, sharing and buying of office materials, special incentives and offerings, reduced fees on professional assistance, or opportunities for sharing and exchanging information.

Work with college and university graduate programs. They may choose to work with your organization on a collaborative project.

Become a leading organization within your community. Welcome the many stakeholders within your community to your organization for an open house. Stakeholders may include other arts organizations, faith-based organizations, educational institutions, social service organizations, government and community leaders, businesses and corporations, service, retail establishments, restaurants and hotels.

Many of the challenges cited are the continuous hurdles faced by most nonprofit’s, and in difficult times or not-so-difficult times.

In challenging times with public and private budgets being cut, uncertainty can pervade an organization’s management structure causing decisions to be made based on fear rather than reality. Overcome the impulse to manage timidly due to looming budget cuts that may never occur, and continue to identify proactive marketing strategies.