



Richard Drew / AP

Nancy Coyne, CEO of Serino Coyne, poses with theatrical posters in the lobby of her New York offices. Her company has found ways to generate excitement about live theater.

“A part of your memory is on that isn’t on when you are watching a movie or television. People remember Broadway shows in an unbelievable way. They save their Playbills. It’s still a special occasion in a world where there are no more special occasions.”

Nancy Coyne, manager of Serino Coyne, Broadway’s largest advertising and marketing agency.

Marketer knows how to fill Broadway seats

By **Michael Kuchwara**
AP drama writer

NEW YORK — Nancy Coyne knows the art of selling Broadway shows. “The Phantom of the Opera.” “The Lion King.” “The Producers.” “Hairspray.” “Wicked.” And more.

Talk to her about getting people into theater seats, and you will get the passion of a true believer, a woman who can sell and cheer on the shows she represents, turning them into well-known brands.

Not that the woman who runs Serino Coyne, Broadway’s largest advertising and marketing agency, really likes the word. “Branding is simply the promotion of a product through unique design and advertising, publicity and marketing,” she said.

Branding didn’t start with Coyne, and there certainly are other big advertising companies on Broadway, such as SpotCo. But Coyne and her company, which is now part of Omnicom Inc., dominate the New York theater business — with clients ranging from the Walt Disney Co. to Cameron Mackintosh to the upcoming Nathan Lane-Matthew Broderick revival of Neil Simon’s “The Odd Couple,” already this fall’s impossible ticket.

“We all have a circle of people we trust, and I trust Nancy,” said Thomas Schumacher, president of Disney Theatrical Productions. “She has vast experience — more than 20 years in fact — and a vast knowledge of Broadway and advertising, and she has wisely guided me.”

It was Coyne, Schumacher said, who figured out that Disney’s three Broadway musicals — “Beauty and the Beast,” “The Lion

King” and “Aida” — could be sold together and referred to as “Disney on Broadway,” a clever positioning that enhanced the Disney name as well as the individual shows.

Coyne, a friendly woman with a sunny smile and a startling resemblance to actress Marsha Mason, exudes an enthusiasm about what she hawk. Sit down with her in the hushed confines of an upscale Theater District hotel, the kind of establishment where power breakfasts are served, and, over coffee and scrambled eggs, she will hold forth enthusiastically about theater.

“We are the original reality art form,” said the one-time child performer, delivering a pitch that is equal parts persuasion and cheerful sermonette. “There is a live person performing for you at 8 o’clock tonight. By 11 o’clock, it’s going to be over. You can’t rewind. You can’t listen to it over and over again. Therefore, you have to stay engaged.”

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The rule of thumb for what a Broadway show should spend each week on advertising is about 10 percent of a production’s weekly potential gross. For “Wicked,” which has a gross potential of more than \$1.15 million each week, that would translate into more than \$100,000.

The show, according to producer David Stone, is actually spending a bit less —

about \$90,000 — much of it, these days, on outdoor ads. Coyne suggested the billboard approach, he said, because “Wicked” is “such a powerful title and image. You don’t need to convince people to see ‘Wicked.’ You need to remind them that they can.”

Serino Coyne, a joint venture with business partner Matthew Serino, was born in the late 1970s, when the advertising of Broadway shows was much more conservative. It was only earlier in the same decade that TV ads first became a reality — when Bob Fosse created a TV spot for “Pippin” and extended the life of the show by several years. A new way of selling shows had arrived.

Theater has lagged behind other industries in tapping ways to attract audiences.

“The reason it is slow is because there’s a ceiling on how much money we can make,” Coyne said. So she has to be careful about where she places ads — print, TV, radio, billboards. For example, she explains, a show in a 1,000-seat theater with eight performances a week can only sell 8,000 tickets for that week’s performances, regardless of demand.

“You can’t sell a ticket for a seat that’s not there,” she said. “How many tickets do you think I could sell for ‘Spamalot’ tonight? As many as possible. But there are only 1,500 seats in the theater.”

There is no substitute for live theater, Coyne reiterated, a fact that underlines all her ad campaigns.

“You can’t put it on television. You can’t put it on film. You can do a good movie version of a Broadway show, like ‘Chicago,’ but it is totally different.”