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Broadway's Marketing Turns Interactive

By GREGORY SCHMIDT

THE bright lights of Broadway draw millions of people to New York's theater district every year, but having a celebrity's name on a marquee does not always guarantee a full house. So to fill more seats, theater producers are turning to [MySpace](#) to make a few new friends.

Broadway, like every other segment of the entertainment industry, has been using the Internet as a marketing tool for years. The Web sites of Broadway shows typically come with the requisite biographies of the cast and creative team, critics' blurbs and a link to buy tickets online.

Lately, however, producers have been stepping up their online presence in an effort to spread word of mouth among Internet users, a concept known as viral marketing.

Broadway productions now offer pages on social networking sites. For example, the MySpace page for "In the Heights" features a blog with updates about the show, widgets that fans can embed in their own MySpace pages, a jukebox that plays songs from the show and several music videos from the cast. These include a parody of the song "Umbrella" called "Abuela," and a spoof of "High School Musical" that features Lin-Manuel Miranda, the show's lyricist and star, singing and dancing in Central Park.

Mr. Miranda has created several videos for the Web, including a series called "Legally Brown," which lampooned the [MTV](#) reality show that chose a replacement for the lead in "Legally Blonde." In the series, which is at legallybrownonbroadway.com and on [YouTube](#), Broadway stars like Matthew Morrison of "South Pacific," [Allison Janney](#) of the coming "9 to 5: The Musical" and Cheyenne Jackson of "Xanadu" competed to become the next piragua vendor on "In the Heights."

"It's another creative outlet," said Mr. Miranda, who has posted 16 videos on YouTube for his show since it opened Off Broadway. Mr. Miranda said he was able to attract such high-profile names to the "Legally Brown" project after "In the Heights" won the [Tony Award](#) for best musical.

"I call 'Legally Brown' the most decadent use of post-Tony capital ever," he said, explaining that he reached out to people he met on the awards show circuit to satirize their celebrity status in his videos. "We're surrounded by some of the brightest talents around in the theater community, and it's a shame not to take advantage of that."

But Broadway is still feeling its way through uncharted territory.

"It's been more about casting the net and seeing what works," said Sara Fitzpatrick, the director for the interactive division at SpotCo, an advertising agency based in New York that has worked on campaigns for

"In the Heights," "Shrek the Musical" and "Chicago." "We're still in the newer stages."

Ms. Fitzpatrick says the trend to use viral marketing techniques in theater has been growing in the last year, and it is becoming an important part of a marketing campaign, which also includes traditional elements like newspaper, television and outdoor advertising.

"Shrek the Musical" has its own social network at www.shrekster.com, a Web site with profiles of the show's characters and the latest news from the kingdom of Duloc. Giving theater fans access to a show through the Internet helps generate interest and sell tickets. Paid attendance for the 2007-8 season dipped 0.2 percent, to 12.27 million, from the previous season, according to the [Broadway League](#), an industry trade association. The decline was attributed mainly to a stagehands' strike that shut down most Broadway productions for 19 days in November 2007.

There is anecdotal evidence that viral marketing draws theatergoers from all over the world. Mr. Miranda said that he had met fans at the stage door after a performance who told him that his videos inspired them to come to New York to see his show. Some fans even pay tribute with their own videos.

After seeing a video on YouTube of a 10-year-old from New Orleans rapping songs from "In the Heights," Mr. Miranda said he was impressed.

"He had never seen the show; he just watched clips online," Mr. Miranda said. "He did this on his own, just because he loved the show."

When he found out the boy, Nicholas Dayton, and his mother were coming to New York to see the show, Mr. Miranda invited them backstage after a performance to film a video of Nicholas singing the show's finale with the cast.

Kevin McCollum, a producer of shows like "Avenue Q," "In the Heights," "Rent" and "[title of show]," said he was a strong advocate of using the Internet to reach a niche audience that might not be accessible through traditional marketing. His theory is that the more people gravitate toward technology, the more they will hunger for human interaction.

"Technology is the tool, not the destination," Mr. McCollum said. "The destination is a live audience."

Marketing agencies are experimenting with ways to benefit from having that live audience gathered to see a show. Situation Interactive, a firm based in New York, used marketing campaigns that incorporated mobile phones for shows like "Blue Man Group" and "Mamma Mia!," offering audience members a chance to win prizes by sending [text messages](#) from their cellphones. For "Hair," which is headed to Broadway in March, fans will get the chance to text their reviews to the show's Web site immediately after a performance.

This concept, known as mobile marketing, is a natural fit for live entertainment, said Situation Interactive's president, Damian Bazadona, because people tend to have cellphones with them at all times.

"Mobile is entrenched in everything we do," Mr. Bazadona said. "It's happening full swing. It's becoming part of the overall marketing plan."

Situation Interactive experimented with new technology in other campaigns as well. The firm worked with

the producers of "Billy Elliot" to create videos that chronicled the rehearsals of the three boys who rotate as the lead character.

For "9 to 5: The Musical," the firm is working on an online game in which players can upload pictures of their bosses for a shooting gallery. The show's Web site will feature personalized e-cards, featuring the voice of [Dolly Parton](#) greeting recipients.

To help the producers of "Sunday in the Park With George" build a relationship with theatergoers, Situation Interactive set up a Web site that allowed users to digitally recreate [Georges Seurat's](#) "Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte" with personalized dots. For "November," the playwright [David Mamet](#) contributed a blog, writing as the play's lead character, the president of the United States. Fans were invited to participate in online karaoke for "Hairspray" and a digital ticket rush for "Spring Awakening."

"The challenge of marketing is how to target people," said Mr. McCollum, the producer.

Of course, viral marketing is not suited to every show. Some Broadway shows still rely on a more traditional campaign. The trick is to find a balance.

"In the theater, there is only one proven marketing technique that works: to generate word of mouth," Mr. McCollum said. "Everything else is a shot in the dark."

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