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Doing Well by Doing Good: Les Grands Ballets Canadiens de Montréal Offers Dance Therapy as a Strategic Initiative

André Courchesne, Philippe Ravanas, Cristian Pulido

Introduction

I have to admit, not everything is planned in life. In fact, my father was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease, and while looking on the Net for how to help him I stumbled across research showing the effectiveness of dance therapy." – Alain Dancyger, Executive Director, Les Grands Ballets Canadiens de Montréal.¹

A few years after his father was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease, Alain Dancyger presented a renewed vision for his organization at the annual meeting of the Arts Administration Educators Association, held in Montreal in 2014. His presentation centred on the impact of expanding the vision of an arts organization without changing its mission. Dancyger was concerned about how Les Grands Ballets Canadiens de Montréal (GBC), which he had headed for 20 years, might consolidate its customer base and generate new sources of earned and contributed income. He describes for us how GBC expanded its vision by adopting two key directions: enriching the consumer experience, and promoting well-being through dance.

Inspired by Darwin's (1859) theory of natural selection, Dancyger believes that an artistic organization is a living organism that evolves with its environment, that nothing is stable in arts ecology. Therefore, he questions one of the principles of modern management: that an organization develops according to its core business (Peters and Waterman 1982). According to Dancyger, "the theory 'stick to your core business' is one of the greatest . . .

philosophical errors of the business world." He believes that arts organizations should focus on how audiences live their lives through them, rather than exist as an end in themselves (Walmsley 2016). This approach to management is based on a holistic vision (McAdam and McCreedy 1999), one that is being embraced by a growing number of arts organizations (Rentschler 2002). "What we want to do is transform people's lives, with all the benefits that dance can bring," says Dancyger. "It's a holistic vision, which in fact is a vision that reflects the needs of our clients as well. This vision is also about placing the human being at the very centre, about putting the human being back at the heart of our activities."

By introducing dance therapy as an innovative service, Dancyger has extended not only GBC's range of products, to generate more earned income, but also its donor market, by injecting a "warm glow" effect into the GBC brand (Isen 1970) by doing social good.

This article will proceed as follows. First we provide a brief history of GBC, including recent discussions at the board level on a renewed vision and new directions. Next we describe the new services in relation to the history of dance therapy. Then we review how dance therapy was implemented at GBC and analyze how this new service renews the GBC brand image and has the potential to attract both new customers and new donors.

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Renewed Vision and New Directions

“Our brand is our biggest [accumulation of] capital . . . our main asset: reliability, excellence, quality.” – Alain Dancyger

GBC was founded in 1957 by Ludmilla Chiriaeff. The reputation of this major Canadian ballet company, built on creativity, boldness and quality, has been reinforced by a number of national and international tours in recent years. As a leading cultural institution, the company is currently relocating to new premises, Espace Danse, in Montreal’s central cultural district. In 2015 GBC had total revenues of \$13.5 million, 49% of which was earned income while 28% came from subsidies and 23% was contributed income (sponsorships and donations).

Dancyger, who hails from France, joined the company in 1996 after training extensively in music in London and New York and earning an MBA in Paris.

In 2012 he presented a new holistic vision to the GBC board. He based his strategic analysis on the identification of “three bad guys” representing the challenges currently faced by GBC. The first was the low differentiation or minimal added value of GBC productions on a global scale, the second was stagnation of the dance market in Quebec, and the third was the lack of growth in GBC funding.

Dancyger’s new vision for GBC was intended “to transform people’s lives through all the benefits that dance can bring,” reflecting a search for excellence, creativity and well-being. This quest was incorporated into a new mission statement adopted by the board that same year: “Les Grands Ballets Canadiens de Montréal (GBC) is a creation, production and presentation company of international reputation that dedicates itself to the development of ballet in all of its forms, while remaining faithful to the spirit of classical ballet. The company’s objective is to reach a wide audience, at home and

abroad, in order to move the world through its creativity, imagination and passion for dance. The company’s mission statement encompasses openness, creativity and audacity, reflecting an inspired and generous social vision.” (Grands Ballets Canadiens de Montréal 2012)

The renewed vision comprises two new directions encompassing an array of services:

1. Enrich the customer experience. Based on Pine and Gilmore’s (1999) well-known research on experiential marketing, the customer experience will be transformed through the inclusion of a 350-seat atrium and a 240-seat black box theatre in the new premises, to accommodate meet-the-artists events, a café, post-performance events, and social dancing classes combined with fitness programs offered at preferred rates for regular customers.
2. Use dance as a tool to promote health and well-being. Customer-oriented dance therapy will be offered in four studios dedicated to dance therapy during the day and recreational leisure in the evening, bringing professional dancers and community members together. Dance therapy sessions will be available in GBC’s new premises and in hospitals, while recreational dance will be adapted to patients’ specific needs (e.g., Parkinson’s disease).

According to Dancyger, these services will bring to GBC “not only ballet lovers, but all those interested in dance in some way: if you’re healthy you’ll have access to social dance and fitness programs, and if you’re not healthy you’ll be directed to dance therapy.” This approach to arts consumption is innovative, because it shows that the arts can provide more than aesthetic benefits (Bourgeon-Renault et al. 2006) and also gives the company a competitive advantage by extending its base of consumers and donors.



ABSTRACT

In 2017, Les Grands Ballets Canadiens de Montréal will move to new premises. The company has seized this opportunity to renew its vision in order to increase its social impact and generate new sources of earned and contributed income. During in-depth discussions at the board level, executive director Alain Dancyger demonstrated that the company’s growth was limited by its dominant position in a stagnant market and a lack of growth potential in its core business, both at home and abroad. The company needed to renew its vision by enriching the customer experience and using dance as a tool to promote health and well-being. The board agreed that the renewed vision would have a positive impact on the company’s brand image. The authors describe how an arts organization can introduce new services and increase its earned and contributed income by doing social good.

KEYWORDS

Segmentation, performing arts, relationship marketing, frequent consumers

Body and Soul

“The meaning of life is to be found where our blood and flesh whisper to our unconscious.” – Georges Sheehan (1978), 120

Contrary to popular belief, dance therapy is not a form of physical therapy. Its purpose is to reconnect body and soul. “Research in neuroscience has proven that dancing can create not only physical changes but also emotional and spiritual ones,” says Susan Imus.² “It can improve our physical *and* mental health.” Imus is chair of the Creative Arts Therapies Department at Columbia College Chicago and an international authority in the field. Another common assumption is that the discipline is heavily influenced by Eastern healing practices and was born during the hallucinogenic 1960s. It is, in fact, deeply rooted in Western medicine. “Healing arts are as ancient as the dawn of civilization,” explains Imus. “We know that primitive communities would worship through dance and that these rituals were used for health and healing. In the 1930s the Hungarian choreographer Rudolf Laban explored the psychological aspects of movement and the Austrian psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich introduced body work into his therapeutic practice. But our discipline was really established in the aftermath of the Second World War.”

In 1946 the Swiss pantomime dancer Trudi Schoop (with whom Imus would work in later years) immigrated to the United States and began to work in Los Angeles with people diagnosed with schizophrenia. Schoop believed that these people’s posture reflected their emotional turmoil. She used movement to help draw them out of isolation and encourage them to respond to human contact instead of shrinking from it.

During the same period in Washington, DC, the modern dancer Marian Chace began volunteering at St. Elizabeth’s psychiatric hospital and

worked with soldiers suffering from shellshock – what is now known as post-traumatic stress disorder. She offered the soldiers dance and movement classes and rapidly observed improvements in their behaviour. The hospital’s psychiatrists took note and kept encouraging her. Chace began to study psychiatry. She made a connection between body distortion and mental pain and between postural and psychic shifts. She integrated psychiatric, psychoanalytic and psychological theories into her modern dance practice. The work of both Schoop and Chace was seminal to the birth of the discipline. Chace helped found the American Dance Therapy Association (ADTA), in 1966, and served as its first president.



Birth of a Profession

ADTA, which has just celebrated its 50th birthday, has built bridges with sister organizations around the world and has contributed to the setting of certification criteria for dance therapy academic programs. Only seven of these programs in the United States (including that at Columbia College Chicago) are certified by ADTA. Although they all meet the Association’s requirements, each program has its particularities. For instance, candidates for the program at Columbia College must have not only five years’ dance performance experience but also experience in teaching dance. “We believe that one needs to have both performed and taught to successfully engage in a dance therapy career,” explains Imus. “Programs such as ours tend to attract seasoned dancers seeking a second career, as one [starts] at a very young age in this discipline. But as the profession has gained credibility, we [are now seeing] younger applicants who started to dance

RÉSUMÉ

En 2017, les Grands Ballets Canadiens de Montréal emménageront dans de nouveaux locaux. La compagnie a saisi cette occasion pour renouveler sa vision afin d’accroître son impact social et générer de nouvelles sources de revenus, tant au niveau des revenus autonomes qu’au niveau des dons et subventions. Lors de discussions en profondeur avec le conseil d’administration, le directeur général Alain Dancyger a démontré que la croissance de la compagnie était limitée par sa position dominante dans un marché en stagnation et par le manque de potentiel de croissance au sein même de ses activités de base, que ce soit au Québec ou à l’étranger. Il fallait que la compagnie renouvelle sa vision en bonifiant l’expérience client et en utilisant la danse comme moyen pour promouvoir la santé et le bien-être. Le conseil d’administration a reconnu que la vision renouvelée aurait un impact positif sur l’image de marque de la compagnie. Les auteurs décrivent la manière dont une organisation artistique peut proposer de nouveaux services et ainsi augmenter ses revenus autonomes, de même que ses revenus de sources privées et publiques, en contribuant au bien commun.

MOTS CLÉS

Réflexion stratégique, vision organisationnelle, diversification des revenus, image de marque, leadership

at a young age and [are considering] dance therapy as a first career. We still require . . . performance and teaching experience.”

Unlike dance instructors with their students, dance therapists do not tell their patients what to do. They enter into a reciprocal, dynamic relationship with their patients. They invite them to improvise movements that express or explore their particular mental state. This creative process is used to effect change and transformation. With veterans, it is used to decrease anxiety and insomnia and to reduce triggers to sound or other visual stimuli that elicit painful memories, according to Imus.

Dance therapy has outgrown the field of psychiatry. It is now used to ease chronic pain, address behavioural problems in schools, soothe autistic children and, in the correctional system, prepare inmates for reintegration into society. “We all can benefit greatly from the therapeutic effects of dance and art-making,” says Imus. “Neuroscience research has proven that making art can contribute to physical, emotional and spiritual wellness. It can improve our health and strengthen our immune system.”



Implementation Phase

In 2013 GBC set up a new division, the National Centre for Dance Therapy (NCDT), based on four objectives:

- to promote the beneficial effects of dance for individuals
- to offer new career opportunities to professional dancers in transition
- to establish agreements and partnerships to enhance international visibility in the field of dance therapy
- to raise the public profile of dance and of the GBC brand

According to Christian Sénéchal, NDCT’s first and current director, no other arts organization in the world provides dance therapy services, training and research. “The Centre reinforces the perception of dance as in the public interest, as it brings together medical professionals and experienced dancers,” he says.³ The division was officially launched in April 2013 and immediately caught the attention of the media, including the *Wall Street Journal*, and members of the public who were dealing with health issues.

NDCT’s first step, after obtaining a training licence from ADTA, was to launch a pilot project to train therapists; it will also be partnering with three Montreal universities to offer a master’s degree. The current cohort of students are from Australia, Canada, Japan and Lebanon, and the majority are either dancers, physiotherapists, psychologists or social workers.

Its second step was to embark on a research study, with two objectives in mind: to demonstrate to Canadian health authorities and other public and private partners that dance therapy has measurable impacts, in order to secure long-term public and private funding; and to integrate dance therapists into hospital professional teams on a trial basis. Two patient groups were targeted: seniors with cognitive problems and teenagers with eating disorders.

The implementation phase of the Centre (2013–17) had a budget of \$1.6 million. Training and research activities were financed through public and private partners, hospital foundations and the company’s fund earmarked for special projects.

For NCDT’s regular operations (starting in mid-2017), Sénéchal projects a break-even occupancy rate of 50% for the four studios, based on a schedule of 20 hours per week (the pilot projects carried out during the implementation phase consisted of some 15 hours of dance therapy per week), combined with the full-time position of

RESUMEN

En 2017 Les Grands Ballets Canadiens de Montréal se mudan a nuevos locales. La compañía se ha aprovechado de esta oportunidad para renovar su visión de manera a aumentar su impacto social y generar nuevas fuentes de ingresos propios y de contribuciones. Durante discusiones de fondo que se llevaron a cabo en el consejo de administración, el director general Alain Dancyger demostró que el auge de la compañía se veía limitado por su posición dominante en un mercado estancado y por la falta de potencial de crecimiento para su actividad principal, tanto localmente como en el extranjero. Se vio la necesidad de renovar la visión de la compañía enriqueciendo la experiencia del cliente al utilizar la danza como medio de promover la salud y el bienestar. El consejo acordó que esta visión renovada tendría un impacto positivo sobre la imagen de marca de la compañía. Los autores describen cómo una organización artística puede introducir nuevos servicios y obtener mayores ingresos y contribuciones haciendo un bien social.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Pensamiento estratégico, visión organizacional, diversificación de los ingresos, imagen de marca, liderazgo