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SCIENCE FICTION WRITERS HAVE LONG ASSUMED WE COULD EVENTUALLY CONQUER DISTANCE USING TELEPORTATION DEVICES. Some researchers in the field of ecommerce believe that distance has already been conquered. Merchants like Amazon.com encourage customers to view selections, sample pages, check out reviews, get free shipping, and even return books if customers change their minds. Amazon.com also realized the value of distance when it created one-click technology. The number of clicks may be ecommerce's way of measuring distance and in this article, Julie E. Kendall aptly points out that ebusinesses can manage the e-distance they are from their competitors. Or maybe we should not refer to them as competition, but as their collaborators and partners. Professor Kendall's conclusions are based on location theory and her actual experience researching the strategic importance of Websites for nonprofit theatre groups in the South Jersey region.

E-distance and the Theatres of South Jersey

by Julie E. Kendall, Rutgers University



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Locating like-businesses together in clusters often helps the businesses perform better than those that are in dispersed locations. Demonstrative examples of this are co-located art dealers, antique dealers, restaurants, ethnic neighborhoods (such as Chinatown). This also applies to the performing arts, where "Broadway" in New York City and "The West End" in London are prime examples. This example extends to smaller, off-Broadway theatres as well. In New York, 42nd Street between 8th and 9th Avenues is known as "Theatre Row," and in Philadelphia, a portion of Broad Street is known as "The Avenue of the Arts."

This paper examines how small regional theatres in southern New Jersey face ecommerce and how their Web presence defines their virtual location. South Jersey is made up of eight counties and has a population of about 2,300,000 people (U.S. Census Bureau, 2002). This fairly densely populated region can support a number of different theatre groups, but the theatres are spread over the region. In this article I explore whether this is a major advantage to individual theatres or if this spatial relationship establishes a barrier that discourages cooperative efforts among the theatres.

Fifteen South Jersey theatres are then reexamined in the light of emerging ecommerce technologies. In many businesses, ecommerce has made it possible to overcome the tyranny of distance. In this paper, I explore potential ways that South Jersey theatres can cooperate for their mutual benefit.

Location Theory

Although location theory has been around for half of a century, researchers are still usefully examining this problem with a variety of methodologies or exploring unique applications. Some recent research examines the geographical concentration of Internet industries (Kolka, 2002); hotelling (Huck, Muller, & Vriend, 2002); restaurant location (Mariani, 2001); and the location of retail outlets (Netz & Taylor, 2002). Recently, a comprehensive book was published on location theory (Wesolowsky, 2001).

Location decisions are dependent on the attitudes of the proprietors, patrons, communities, region, and even sometimes the country as pointed out by Jacoby (2000) in his recent study of ecommerce hot spots. But the truly revealing research examines what happens within the cluster, and Baptista (2000) explores whether innova-

tions diffuse faster within regions where technologically close firms exist.

Reasons to Be Close

Location theory examines the advantages of locating in clusters. Art dealers have an obvious advantage that comes from patrons strolling from gallery to gallery in SOHO and from patrons visiting individual shops of antique dealers on Pine Street in Philadelphia. In both these cases, patrons can visually compare the objects for sale. Figure 1 shows how a typical stroller goes from one neighborhood establishment to another.

Location plays a part in off-Broadway theatres as well. Marquees are powerful symbols and the patron who notices the show a theatre is currently producing may decide to see that play or a future production.

Attracting Patrons

The theatres of South Jersey are unable to take advantage of a central theatre district or "theatre row." Theatres are scattered across eight counties and some are located off major highways or sheltered on college campuses. Getting potential audiences to realize that the theatres even exist is a problem that needs to be overcome. This is where ecommerce can play a role.

Theatres need to adequately describe a current production, a series subscription, venue, the participants, and the audience, thus encouraging theatre patrons to come and participate. Theatres have primarily relied on newspaper ads, while depending enormously on series subscribers and repeat visitors. Word of mouth may work well for long-run Broadway productions like *Cats* and *The Producers*, but is of limited value when smaller theatres have very short runs, sometimes only over a single weekend. Radio and TV spots are far too expensive for the most part.

Ecommerce is an ideal place to promote current productions. Since patrons of theatres are educated and have sufficient disposable income to attend cultural events, they tend to have the means and desire to search for information on the Web.

The relationship is asymmetrical, however. Although patrons have the means to seek information, small theatre companies often do not have the personnel, ex-

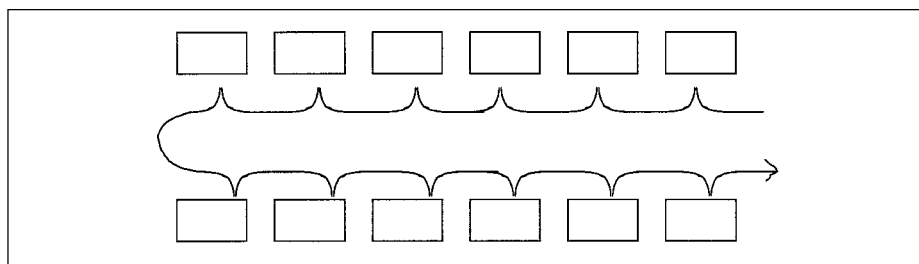


Figure 1: Location theory explains that merchants cooperate to encourage business. A customer may wander from store to store to make a selection.

pertise, or funding or time it takes to develop a Web presence. When a theatre decides to pursue a Web presence, we have found from experience that the theatre tends to begin from scratch, act independently, and use a volunteer to create a Web site that may or may not match their organizational mission (Kendall, 2003).

What Distance Means in Ecommerce

It is said that while railroads conquered distance, ecommerce eliminated distance. That may be true in some ways, but not in all. For example, a customer may be able to obtain information about a product and even see a 3-D photograph as well and thereby save a trip to the store.

According to Kendall (2000) one of the main elements of ecommerce is attracting customers to a Web site. An undiscovered Web site is infinitely distant and one that is five clicks away may rule out 90 percent of the public. Developers of ecommerce sites often use a two-click rule. They design sites that allow customers to access anything on the site by clicking the mouse a maximum of two times. Internal site navigation is a measure of distance.

Locating and getting to the Web site is another form of distance. If a customer uses a search engine, that customer still needs to read, evaluate, and select a link to follow. If a theatre patron is on one theatre Web site and wants to travel to another, the patron has no clue in how to do this (unless of course it is saved in their 'favorites' file).

As location theory researchers have pointed out, there are advantages to locating like-businesses near each other. Minimizing distance is a virtue. In the ecommerce world, we call this distance

(both internal navigation and external navigation) e-distance.

South Jersey Theatres and E-distance

To this researcher the e-distance between South Jersey theatres is greater than the actual distance between the theatres. Some organizations have attempted to provide links to all of the relevant theatre Web sites. Examples of this are the New Jersey Theatre League, the New Jersey Theatre Alliance, NJ Theatre.com, Discover NJ Arts Online, and the South Jersey Cultural Alliance. Some of these levy a fee to the individual theatres to link, but do little besides providing a link to an alphabetized list of theatres. The New Jersey Theatre Alliance is experimenting with online purchasing of ticket packages, but they do not offer individual seats for a particular performance.

In order to browse an upcoming theatre schedule or find out more details about a current production, a patron has to either know all the URLs of the theatres of interest, or keep returning to one of the central alliance Web sites. Figure 2 illustrates that the theatres in South Jersey are not directly linked, so browsing becomes cumbersome.

The theatres, however, do not typically have reciprocal links to the alliance Web sites. This increases the e-distance to the community, and South Jersey theatres need to belong to a community of theatres to survive. Absent are links to other friendly theatres. Although actors taking on roles in a variety of community productions may participate with more than one theatre, the theatres are not yet able to see themselves as a cooperative community like those antique dealers or restaurants we discussed earlier.

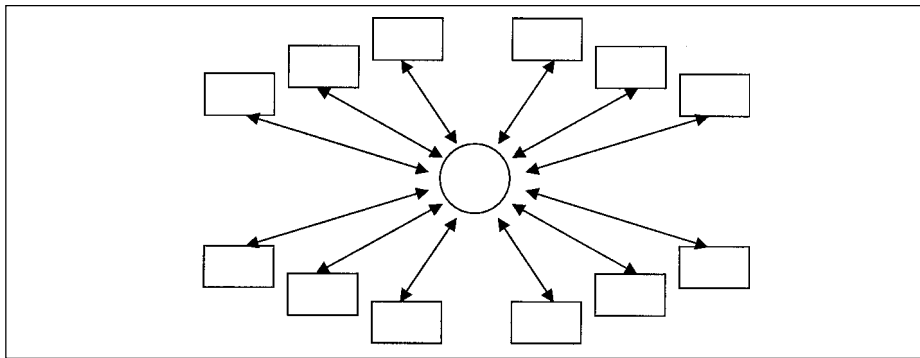


Figure 2: A central location that links Web sites together increases the distance (measured in clicks) between Web sites, and the customer views the theatres as independent entities.

Some Recommendations for South Jersey

On Broadway, theatres are linked in two ways. First, large groups of theatres are owned by organizations such as the Shubert Organization (17 Broadway theatres) or the Nederlander Producing Company of America (8 Broadway theatres, a total of 35 venues throughout the U.S.). Furthermore, tickets are available online through a common ticket agency like Telecharge (owned by the Shubert Organization) or Ticketmaster, the world's largest ticket retailer. Both of these sites describe the play and allow easy navigation among current productions. They also facilitate ticket purchases, albeit for a small fee. Other Web sites like Broadway.com and Playbill.com add reviews, show biz gossip, and curtain call photos. These Web sites minimize e-distance and instill a sense of family.

Even some New York-based off-Broadway theatres share a common box office called Ticket Central, where patrons can purchase tickets online for a dozen productions. On this site, you can find a navigation bar with a feature called "In the Neighborhood." By clicking on this tab, you are directed to a page with neighborhood restaurants (including links to the restaurant Web sites) and detailed parking information. Often restaurants and parking ramps will give discounts to theatre patrons who show their current ticket stubs. The sense of community is very strong and cooperation among theatres, restaurants, and parking establishments is stressed.

Only one of the 15 South Jersey theatres allow ticket purchases online. Some, like Holly City Repertory of Millville, link to local restaurants. Although theatre alliances create links to the theatres, the theatres of South Jersey do not always provide reverse links. Some that do display the links in a disorganized way, so patrons cannot distinguish among the links without actually clicking on them. Some have broken links, and one theatre had, at the time of this research, a link that unintentionally went to a dorm Web-cam, apparently because the domain name changed owners unexpectedly.

The theatres in South Jersey need to join together. They can do this by cooperating and coming together by linking to one another on the Web. These strategic alliances will not result in disloyal patrons. Rather, they will increase the level of interest among patrons. The southern New Jersey nonprofit theatres can greatly benefit from creating a regional identity on the Web. Rather than seeing themselves only as members of a city or county arts community, the theatres can move rhetorically and visually, through the use of their Web presences, to fashion a regional identity that can enable them to build audiences, garner new sources of funding, and discover new well springs of talent. Only then will they be able to conquer e-distance.

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