

Marketing is main riddle for performer of mystery plays

Mystery on the Menu theater owner Barbara Fox loves to write and stage interactive plays. Her challenge is to effectively market her company in South Florida.

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When Barbara Fox decided to start her own business, she knew she faced challenges as a woman going it alone. She never imagined one would involve three burly secret service agents for the prime minister of Turkey wrestling her to the ground.

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But such is the world of entrepreneurial theater.

About 20 years ago, Fox started Mystery on the Menu in Washington, D.C., a theater company in which she writes, produces, casts, stages and directs murder mysteries for dinner parties, corporate events, bar mitzvahs and any other occasion calling for entertainment. In 2000, she moved to Miami, starting from scratch.

The shows, which follow a fairly typical story arc of murder, mayhem and resolution, can be held in restaurants, hotels, even trains. One important lesson she learned after the secret service tussle: Make sure everyone knows in advance you're pretending.

"I had just fired a gun, and three men rushed in and said, 'Drop the gun!' " she explained. "They grabbed me and grabbed my arm and my hand just froze on the gun. The audience loved it. They thought it was part of the show and said, 'Look, that actress is actually crying.' "

BE PREPARED

Fox has learned some other lessons along the way. Number one, always have a contingency plan.

"One time an actor got on the wrong train, and I actually saw him through the window as his train was going south, and I was going north. That's kind of a horrible thing."

Fox started acting as a student at the University of Illinois and then Roosevelt University, where she received a degree in education with a minor in theater. After marrying and having four children, she settled down writing freelance feature stories from home. But her heart was always in theater. When her youngest left home, Fox decided to look into interactive theater but couldn't find a script, so she decided to write and produce a play herself.

"I did a show, and 150 people came and gave us a standing ovation. They said it was the most fun they'd had in theater," she said.

Local papers started reviewing the plays, with articles appearing in the Washington Post and Washington Times. With very little marketing effort, Mystery on the Menu (www.mysteryonthe menu.com) was up and running. Fox started grossing about \$90,000 a year.

Jump ahead to Miami in 2000. Weary of the weather in the Northeast, Fox and her husband decided to head south and bring the company with them.

"I literally did not know a soul," she said.

MOVING TO MIAMI

Hoping to make contacts, Fox joined the Miami Beach Chamber of Commerce and Theater League of Florida. She also sent out press packets to local newspapers and held a free public show at the Seville Hotel. About 50 people, including reporters, showed up.

Word spread, and eventually Fox started booking gigs at corporate luncheons, fund raisers, cruise ships, bar mitzvahs and other events.

But business did not take off like it did in Washington. Fox blames herself mostly, saying she still struggles with marketing.

"I'd rather sit down and write a play than send out a flier," she said.

Her problems are typical of fledgling businesses, said G. Nancy Allen, president and CEO of the Women's Business Development Center (www.womensbusiness.info).

"Between marketing and access to capital, those are the two things that cause businesses to fail within the first year," she said. "There's no real formula unless you have a million dollars to spend on marketing."

Fox did a lot of things right, Allen said, by joining the chamber, making contacts through a professional organization and donating shows to fundraisers.

GET A LAWYER

She also made another key move at the outset: She hired an attorney and an accountant to handle complicated contract and tax issues she knew were over her head.

"That's really important for women, because we don't delegate very well. We think that no one can do it as well as we can," Allen said. "The more help you can get for what's not your strength, the more you can concentrate on things that are your strength."

Allen also advises entrepreneurs to set a timeline for themselves.

"You should say I have x number of months to do this and really consider at that point if the business is moving where you want it to move, because it's easy to keep sinking money into something after you've invested so much time and money," she said.

For Fox, who works out of her home and has very little overhead unless she's staging a production with actors and props, the business is more about passion.

"I tell people, you think I'm just lying on the beach, but I'm actually plotting and planning and that's where I do most of my thinking. I'm working, but it's a lovely way to work," said Fox, who has also published two mystery novels. "With a business, if you don't love what you do, you shouldn't be doing it, and I'm sort of fortunate because I love everything I do."